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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Folk Humor and Folk Wit in Works by William Faulkner

by

Michael Patrick O'Hea

(C)

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled Folk Humor and Folk Wit in Works by William Faulkner submitted by Michael Patrick O'Hea in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

.....

Supervisor

.....

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Date.....October 6, 1988.....

For Susan

Abstract

Folk humor and folk wit pervade the writings of William Faulkner. In his short stories "Fool About a Horse" and "Spotted Horses," Faulkner draws on the tradition of southwestern humor, specifically, on the motif of the horse swap, and modifies it to create his own brand of comedy, characterized by fallible, absurd, but sympathetic protagonists and by tension between the sexes. In *The Hamlet*, Faulkner in turn modifies "Fool About a Horse" and "Spotted Horses," producing a powerfully moving work, which takes up more generally his theme of men, women, and Motion, and which chronicles the end of the horse swap as a game and pastime.

In *As I Lay Dying*, elements of folk humor are evident in the character of Anse Bundren, a perversion of the trickster protagonist of frontier literature, whose hypocrisy is exposed by the witty humor of his neighbor Vernon Tull. Tull, in contrast to Anse, embodies the true comic spirit in Faulkner of resilience and perseverance in the face of adverse circumstances.

The same wit employed by Tull is practised notably by three other characters in Faulkner: *The Sound and the Fury*'s Jason Compson and Uncle Job and *As I Lay Dying*'s Doc Peabody. All three use wit that is similar in tone and technique, but wield it with markedly different degrees of control and compassion.

In *The Reivers*, Faulkner combines humorous folk wit with the theme of men, women, and Motion that he took up previously in *The Hamlet*, but eliminates the absurd humor and black humor characteristic of his earlier novels to produce his only novel that conforms to the patterns of traditional comedy.

Preface

This thesis is comprised of four essays dealing with two related topics. The first is Faulkner's use and adaptation of comic elements present in the writings of the humorists of the Old Southwest, namely such men as Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, William Tappan Thompson, T.B. Thorpe, Johnson J. Hooper, and George Washington Harris. The second topic is the unique wit employed by the inhabitants of Faulkner's fictional county of Yoknapatawpha. Although, together, the essays do not argue a central thesis, they are ordered in such a way that they proceed from a discussion of how Faulkner adapted for his own purposes one specific comic motif of frontier humor to how he drew on the more general elements of traditional comedy.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Robert Solomon for his guidance and good humor in supervising this thesis, and to my wife, Susan, for her patient wisdom.

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I. Faulkner as Raconteur: Southwestern Humor and *The Hamlet*

Faulkner's debt to the humorists of the Old Southwest [1] has been noticed and written about by many critics. [2] Nevertheless, detailed examinations of his virtuosity in writing within the tradition and his variations on it have not emerged. [3] Even a study as focused as Floyd C. Watkins' and Thomas Daniel Young's article on the stylistic differences between the short story versions of the episodes in *The Hamlet* and the versions in the novel itself [4] raises more questions than it answers. Why, for instance, did Faulkner chiefly abandon the colloquial style of "Spotted Horses" when he prepared the same episode for the fourth book of *The Hamlet*, "The Peasants"? One wonders what

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[1] With respect to the frontier humor written between roughly 1830 and 1860, the Old Southwest is usually defined as Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri, and Tennessee.

[2] See, for example, Carvel Collins, "Faulkner and Certain Earlier Southern Fiction," *College English* 56 (1954): 92-7; Cecil D. Eby, "Faulkner and the Southwestern Humorists," *Shenandoah* 11 (1959): 13-21; M. Thomas Inge, "William Faulkner and George Washington Harris: In the Tradition of Southwestern Humor." *The Frontier Humorists: Critical Views*. Ed. M. Thomas Inge. Hamden: Archon, 1975. 266-80; Robert D. Jacobs, "Faulkner's Humor." *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*. Ed. Louis D. Rubin Jr. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1973. 305-18; Thomas L. McHaney, "What Faulkner Learned from the Tall Tale." *Faulkner and Humor: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 1984*. Ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson and London: UP of Mississippi, 1980. 110-35; N.M. Rinaldi, "Some Uses of Folk Humor by Faulkner," *Mississippi Quarterly* 17 (1964): 107-22; Otis Wheeler, "Some Uses of Folk Humor by Faulkner." *William Faulkner: Four Decades of Criticism*. Ed. Linda W. Wagner. n.p.: Michigan State UP, 1973. 68-72.

[3] One exception is Alan B. Howard's excellent article "Huck Finn in the House of Usher: The Comic and Grotesque Worlds of *The Hamlet*," *Southern Review* 5 (June 1972): 125-46.

[4] "Revisions of Style in Faulkner's *The Hamlet*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 5 (1959): 327-36.

Faulkner gained in substantially altering the stories for the novel and what he lost, if anything. In examining the different versions of the two tales most directly related to southwestern humor, the "Fool About a Horse"/"souring" of Ab Snopes story and the "Spotted Horses"/"The Peasants" story, it soon becomes clear just how skilled a folk tale raconteur Faulkner was when he published the short stories and just how much better a comic writer he had become when he modified the short stories for *The Hamlet*. Not only are the novel's versions of the episodes much more powerful and moving than either their nineteenth-century analogues or the previously published short story versions, they are better-told and funnier.

In the story of the Yoknapatawphan amateur horse trader and his contest with the legendary Pat Stamper, Faulkner's familiarity with the conventions of southwestern storytelling and his skill in working with them are obvious. Both "Fool About a Horse," the short story published in 1936, and what I will for convenience call "The Souring of Ab Snopes" (*The Hamlet*'s version) [5] have much in common with Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's famous tale, "The Horse Swap." First, Faulkner's story and its nineteenth-century counterpart both center on a horse trade, that is, a contest hinging on one trader's ability to trick another into exchanging a poor horse for a virtually worthless one. The trader achieves this end by playing down or artfully

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[5] See the appendix for summaries of the rather complex plots of the two versions of Faulkner's story.

disguising his own horse's flaws and by extolling its good points while attempting to show up his opponent's horse for the undesirable commodity it ~~no~~ doubt is. Nevertheless, the trading duel is conducted as if both horses were veritable bargains and both traders honest, trustworthy merchants. Consequently, the most successful traders are those who manage to combine excellent verbal and conversational skill with a keen ability to assess a horse's merits visually, or, as the trader himself might put it, to have "'an eye for horse flesh.'" [6]

Second, in both Faulkner and Longstreet, the contest is a community event, a form of public entertainment in which a clear winner is declared and hailed while a clear loser is derided and scoffed at. For this reason, there is for each contestant an end to the game in the community where the match takes place. The loser is publicly proved to be too untrustworthy to trade with and the winner too sharp. Nevertheless, rematches and matches between one community's recognised champion and another's would keep the art of horse-swapping from dying out after the first contest.

Third, each story pits an outsider against a local champion and hence one region against another. Accordingly, community pride is put at risk along with the personal pride of the trader himself. And finally, Faulkner's story and Longstreet's both have one horse trader who thinks too

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[6] "Fool About a Horse." *The Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*. Ed. Joseph Blotner. New York: Random House, 1979. 118-19. Further references to this story will be cited by page number in the text.

highly of his own skill, publicly boasts of it, and who is then humbled at the hands of a superior artist. Thus, at the end of each story there is a sense that comic justice has been served.

Despite these similarities, Faulkner's story and Longstreet's are quite different in tone, spirit, and effect. In "The Horse Swap," the tale is related with Latinate diction and in an elevated style by a formally educated traveller who has witnessed a curious frontier phenomenon. His narrative is apparently intended for a similarly educated and genteel audience back home. [7] In Faulkner, the story is recounted by V.K.Suratt/Ratliff (Faulkner altered the name from Suratt to Ratliff when he wrote *The Hamlet*) to a group of "gentlemen" ("Fool About a Horse," 128). This audience is identified in the novel as the men who habitually gather on the porches of Varner's store and of Mrs. Littlejohn's boarding house. However, with respect to the narrative voice at least, Faulkner is still operating within the conventions of southwestern humor because, as do many nineteenth-century yarn-spinning characters, Suratt/Ratliff speaks colloquial English and embellishes his story with exaggeration, similes and metaphors drawn from rural or frontier life (especially in "Fool About a Horse"), and humorous understatement. In this respect, "The Souring of Ab Snopes" and "Fool About a Horse"

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[7] This frame is a common one for such stories. See Carolyn S. Brown's *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature* 41-54, for a dicussion of the personae Longstreet creates in his collection of humorous sketches, *Georgia Scenes*.

resemble the kind of story best exemplified by T.B. Thorpe's "Big Bear of Arkansas" and George Washington Harris' Sut Lovingood tales.

His narrator's speech and tone notwithstanding, Faulkner does depart in major ways from the southwestern comic tradition in both "Fool About a Horse" and "The Souring of Ab Snopes." First, Faulkner chooses for his protagonist not a detached observer as in "The Horse Swap," nor the victorious trickster as in one of Sut Lovingood's adventures, nor the frontier hero who conquers a menace such as a huge bear as in Thorpe's story. In a modern twist on the trickster-tricked motif, Faulkner focuses our attention on the horse trader who will, by story's end, get the worst of the horse swap. Second, Faulkner raises the stakes in the contest to include the livelihood of one of the participants, which, in this case, is the only good mule that Lum Suratt/Ab Snopes owns. [8] Faulkner's hero actually suffers economic hardship as a result of the poor swap he makes.

Third, the participants in Faulkner's horse swap are unfairly matched. Not only are Pat Stamper and his able assistant, Jim, much more experienced than Lum/Ab, they are possessed with superhuman talents which one normally

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[8] In an unpublished typescript of "Fool About a Horse," the protagonist is identified as Lum Suratt, father of V.K., who narrates the story. In *The Hamlet*'s version, Faulkner changed the protagonist to Ab Snopes and made him V.K.'s neighbor. When referring to the two versions together, I will call the protagonist "Lum Suratt/Ab Snopes" and his wife "Mrs. Suratt/Snopes" (her name is Vynie in both stories).

associates with the world of the animated cartoon, such as the ability to inflate a horse with a bicycle pump. This represents a significant turnaround from the southwestern tall tale, in which such unbelievable circumstances serve to heighten the achievement of the storytelling protagonist who, with superhuman abilities of his own, manages to conquer an unusually wily bear or some other frontier menace. In Faulkner's case, such enhancement works directly against Lum/Ab, creating a contest unfairly rigged against the clever but fallible Yoknapatawphan trader.

Fourth, Faulkner introduces to the horse-trading premise tension between the sexes and the plight of the poor white Southern woman. In "Fool About a Horse" and "The Souring of Ab Snopes," the male protagonist is caught in a dilemma he cannot hope to solve. In both versions of Faulkner's story, the very practice of horse-trading is challenged by Mrs. Suratt/Snopes because, as she rightly recognises, it interferes with the necessary (though tedious) work of ploughing the fields, from which the couple derives their living. For Lum/Ab, horse-trading is a luxury he does not have time to afford, although he feels compelled to engage in it because of the pleasure, profit, and prestige it can fetch if done successfully. Horse-trading is the yeoman farmer's only chance to rise above the drudgery and misery of his economic situation. The pastime also lures him because, as a social pursuit, it draws the company of other, somewhat envious and admiring, men to the successful

horse trader.

Although for the husband such an activity can bring a welcome respite from the tedium of ploughing, for his wife, such socializing is merely "'Setting there bragging and lying to a passel of shiftless men.'" [9] This position is understandable because Lum/Ab's horse-dealing puts at risk what his family cannot afford to lose and because it makes him boastful; he thinks more highly of his achievements than the facts warrant. For example, Ab advises his skeptical wife that she "'better thank the Lord that when He give [Ab] a eye for horseflesh He give [him] a little judgment and gumption to go with it'" (31), a statement that his encounter with Pat Stamper proves false. Ab does not have as sharp an eye for "horseflesh" as he thinks he does, nor will he have the judgment to quit trading with Stamper when, after the first swap, he is still in possession of his wife's milk separator.

Because Faulkner introduces the plight of the women to "Fool About a Horse" and "The Souring of Ab Snopes," he creates in these stories more a contest between man and woman than between one horse trader and another. In this pitched battle, both husband and wife come out losers. Reacting to the fact that Lum/Ab has deprived the family of his labor, Mrs. Suratt/Snopes wittily challenges her husband's achievement in obtaining a horse from Beasley Kemp

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[9] *The Hamlet*. New York: Random House, 1964, 32. All further references to faulkner's novel will be cited by page number in the text.

in exchange for some worthless scraps of machinery, and mocks the pastime of horse-trading itself: "she kept on taunting him about swapping for a yard ornament, about how if he could just get it to town somehow maybe he could swap it to the livery stable to prop up in front for a sign" (*The Hamlet*, 32). With his personal pride thus questioned, Lum/Ab decides to take his newly acquired horse with him on his trip to Jefferson to buy his wife's milk separator, a machine Mrs. Suratt/Snopes has labored and saved a long time for and which will save considerable labor when she gets it. Of course, her husband fails in his attempt to outswap the unconquerable Stamper (despite the added incentive of restoring the honor of the Yoknapatawpha trading community), wrongly risks and loses the separator, and thus consigns his wife to more hardship and deprivation. Mrs. Suratt/Snopes' response is to regain the lost separator from Stamper and thus come out ahead in principle if not, at least in Mrs. Snopes' case, in material wealth. There is, then, at stake in Faulkner's story Lum/Ab's personal pride in the masculine pastime of horse-swapping, Yoknapatawpha community pride, the Suratt/Snopes family's livelihood, and the labor that Mrs. Suratt/Snopes has invested in making enough money to buy the separator plus the labor the machine will save. The potential losses of Faulkner's characters are therefore much heavier than those of any character in one of the traditional trading stories.

As much different as Faulkner's story is from its nineteenth-century counterparts, so is *The Hamlet*'s "The Souring of Ab Snopes" different from the previously published story "Fool About a Horse." In the former, Faulkner amplifies the loss and pathos involved in the contest between the Yoknapatawphan trader and Pat Stamper, or more accurately, between the trader and his spouse. There are a few minor changes, of course. In "Fool About a Horse" Varner's store and characters such as Jody whom Faulkner used more extensively in *The Hamlet* are present; since Ab's story in the novel is set outside of Frenchman's Bend, these details have been altered. In addition, Ratliff's dialect is signalled less by spelling variants in *The Hamlet*, although some less idiomatically appropriate phrases from "Fool About a Horse" have been replaced. For example, "a little more and a little more concerned" ("Fool About a Horse," 122) becomes "worrieder and worrieder" (*The Hamlet*, 33). Also, the age of V.K. Suratt/Ratliff at the time of the incident is lowered from twelve to eight.

The major changes are more interesting and account for the novel's being more poignant and significant than the published short story. One of the most important differences, apart from the change in lead character from Lum Suratt to the souring Ab Snopes, is that the short story has the narrator (V.K. Suratt) essentially present an extended apology for the protagonist's behavior, placing much blame for the eventually sad outcome on fate and

circumstances; whereas *The Hamlet* has Ratliff give a more objective, detached account of how the end of Ab Snopes' trading career came about. For example, "Fool About a Horse" opens with the assertions that Mrs. Suratt, not Lum, "bought one horse from Pat Stamper and then sold two back to him," that Lum never intended to do any horse-trading when he set out to buy his wife's milk separator, and that if Lum "had had any notion that he was fated to swap horses with Pat Stamper, they couldn't even have arrested him and taken him to town" (118). This last assertion is graphically reiterated: "he wouldn't no more have set out to tangle with Pat Stamper than he would have set out to swap horses with a water moccasin" (119), and we are told over and over again that fate and circumstances, more than Lum himself, were to blame for the trouble:

> . . . we wasn't even thinking about Pat Stamper, because we didn't even know that Pat Stamper was in Jefferson. . . . It was fate. It was like the Lord Hisself had decided to spend Mammy's separator money for a horse; ("Fool About a Horse," 120)

> It was pure fate. (opening sentence of section II, 120)

> Yes, sir. Fate. The same fate that made Mammy taunt Pap into starting out with Beasley's horse; that same fate that made it a hot morning in July for us to start on. (121)

We are also told in turn that "it" (i.e. the reason Lum got into such trouble) was "the weather" (122), "was to get Beasley's eight dollars back outen Pat some way" (123), was "the demon rum" (123), was Jim's artistry in making the

mules Lum trades for look "jest exactly all right" (126), and was "desperation" (129), all of which are contributing factors to Lum's demise, to be sure. The focus on fate's part in dooming Lum is made most explicit when the narrator tells us that Lum's story is "a kind of sidelight on how, when a man starts out to do something, he jest thinks he is planning: that what he actually is doing is giving the highball to misfortune, throwing open a switch and saying, 'All right, Bad Luck; come right ahead'" (123).

The Hamlet's version omits much, but not all, of fate's role in souring Ab Snopes. The insistence on the trader's innocence disappears in *The Hamlet*, and more blame is directly assigned to Ab and Mrs. Snopes both. The statements about the protagonist having more sense than to trade with Pat Stamper have been taken out and we are instead given the impression that Ab's success in having obtained Beasley's horse for worthless scrap inclines him to believe that maybe his trading skill really is a match for Stamper's:

> Maybe to himself Ab did call his-self the Pat Stamper of the Holland farm or maybe even of all Beat Four, even if maybe he was fairly sho that Pat Stamper wasn't going to walk up to that lot fence and challenge him for it. Sho, I reckon while he was setting there on the gallery with his feet cooling and the sidemeat plopping and spitting in the kitchen and us waiting to eat it so we could go back down to the lot and set on the fence while the folks would come up and look at what he had brung home this time, I reckon maybe Ab not only knowed as much about horse-trading as Pat Stamper, but he owned head for head of them with Old Man Anse himself. (*The Hamlet*, 31-32)

Moreover, even the most coincidental circumstance involved in Ab's demise, the fact that Stamper was camped outside

Jefferson the day Ab was heading there to buy the separator, is said to be as much the result of providential justice as mere chance: "it might have just been that in Ab's state [feeling overly proud about his trading capabilities] it was not only right and natural that Ab would have to pass Stamper to get to Jefferson, but it was foreordained and fated that he would have to" (35).

"The Souring of Ab Snopes" also places more direct blame on Mrs. Snopes than had been put on Mrs. Suratt in "Fool About a Horse." We are told in the latter that Mrs. Suratt "taunted" (119) her husband (perhaps only once), but in the former that Mrs. Snopes "kept on taunting" (32) Ab, and we are given in *The Hamlet* the concrete illustration of her suggestion that Beasley's horse might be more successful as a storefront sign than as a beast of burden.

Although the role of fate is reduced in "The Souring of Ab Snopes" and the Snopeses more directly bring trouble upon themselves, their reasons for acting the way they do are given more emphasis than in "Fool About a Horse." The best example is the positioning of the true observation that when Lum/Ab rode towards Stamper's camp, he was not only championing his own concerns, but Yoknapatawpha community honor. Pat had insulted it in the first place by introducing to the community the horse Beasley and Ab would eventually buy. As Ratliff explains, "for a stranger to come in and start that cash money [the eight dollars Beasley paid for the horse] to changing and jumping from one fellow to

another" (34) was a serious blow to the community's trading pride. "Fool About a Horse" places this partial justification for Lum/Ab's conduct in the middle of a paragraph, flanked before and after by assertions about fate's blame in the affair. In *The Hamlet*'s version, the county pride is given the emphatic last position of the paragraph, and the subsequent explanation of man's lack of free will ("'All right, Bad Luck; come right ahead'" ["Fool About a Horse," 123]) has been omitted. Fate still enters into Ab's plight, but not as fully as Yoknapatawphan community pride:

> And that's what I meant about it was pure fate that had Pat Stamper camped outside Jefferson . . . that day we went to get Miz Snopes' milk separator; camped right there by the road with that nigger magician on the very day when Ab was coming to town with twenty-four dollars and sixty-eight cents in his pocket and the entire honor and pride of the science and pastime of horse-trading in Yoknapatawpha County depending on him to vindicate it. (*The Hamlet*, 34)

"The Souring of Ab Snopes" puts more blame on Ab's shoulders, but holds out more hope for his success than "Fool About a Horse" does for Lum Suratt. Although Faulkner prefaces Ratliff's tale in *The Hamlet* with an explanation of the legendary prowess of Pat Stamper and his talented assistant, "the two of them . . . [worked] in a kind of outrageous rapport like a single intelligence possessing the terrific advantage over common mortals of being able to be in two places at once" (*The Hamlet*,30), "Fool About a Horse" gives more away about the contest's outcome than does "The Souring of Ab Snopes." In the former, for instance, we are

told that "the rest of [the story] don't even hardly need to be told" and that "After the first swap [Lum] was desperate" ("Fool About a Horse," 123) *before* we are given the account of the first encounter between Pat and Lum. Such foreshadowing is dropped in *The Hamlet*'s version with the result that, even though from the preface we do not expect Ab to come out ahead with Stamper, we are at least left the opportunity to hope that he will not lose badly.

The effect of raising our hopes (even slightly) and then dashing them, and indeed the overall difference in thrust between the two versions of the story, can be seen in the small but important substitution by Faulkner of one conjunction for another when he wrote *The Hamlet*. As Ab heads back to town after having made the initial swap of his good mule and Beasley's worthless horse for Pat Stamper's mules, he dares to boast that he has left victorious: "'By God,' Ab said, 'if they can walk home at all, I got that eight dollars back, damn him'" (*The Hamlet*, 37). This wishful thinking, raising our hopes (because in this version we have not been told before the trade that our protagonist loses out in the first swap) is followed in a new paragraph by a telling statement: "But that nigger was a artist" (*The Hamlet*, 37). "Fool About a Horse" reads "*Because* that nigger of Pat Stamper's was a artist" (emphasis added, 127). In the former, the simple adversative "But" objectively dashes our meager hope by justly praising another trader's virtuosity; in "Fool About a Horse," the conjunction "Because" implies

that the statement depends on an understood clause, such as "Lum was not to blame," and makes the sentence into an excuse for Lum's behavior. The statement in "Fool About a Horse" is thus biased, as the narrator attempts (as he does throughout the story) to defend his father's actions. *The Hamlet*'s statement, carrying no such partisan baggage, keeps us closer to what happens to the protagonist, and draws no attention to V.K.'s narrative purpose in relating the story. The statements of excuse and justification in "Fool About a Horse," combined with foreshadowing, bar the reader from experiencing first-hand the ups and downs of the protagonist's struggle to become more than a ploughman.

Our sympathy and pity for the characters are further increased in *The Hamlet* by two other important changes. First, the total victory (over both Pat Stamper and Lum) achieved by Mrs. Suratt at the end of "Fool About a Horse," which relies on the reader trusting that, for Mrs. Suratt's sake, Stamper would essentially cancel the deal he had made with her husband, [10] becomes a pyrrhic victory in "The Souring of Ab Snopes." Mrs. Snopes trades both Ab's team and their only cow to Stamper for the separator. Mrs. Snopes' behavior at the end of the story thus becomes absurd, but necessarily so, since trading the cow is the only way she can assert her own authority over her husband and put an end to his destructive horse-trading and time-squandering. By making the story's ending absurd and pitiful at the same

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[10] In that deal, Lum traded the separator for what turned out to be his original mule and Beasley's horse.

time, Faulkner turns the horse swap tale into a tragicomedy that poignantly conveys the pain and discouragement experienced by both the men and the women of the depressed South.

Finally, "The Souring of Ab Snopes" is simply a better-told story than is "Fool About a Horse." Although both contain excellent examples of Faulkner's comic style, significant passages in *The Hamlet*'s version outdo corresponding stretches in "Fool About a Horse." Here, for example, are, in full, the two accounts of Lum/Ab's discovery that his initial trade with Pat Stamper is not the bargain he first took it to be; the first quotation belongs to "Fool About a Horse," the second to *The Hamlet*. I have italicized ~~in~~ the latter the additions and alterations Faulkner made in revising the former:

> So we give Uncle Ike the rag with Mammy's money in it and me and Pap taken up the separator and started back out to the wagon, to where we had left it. It was still there. I mind how I could see the bed of it where Pap had drawed it up to the door, and I could see the folks from the waist up standing in the alley, and then I realized that it was about twice as many folks looking at our team as it had been when we left. I reckon Pap never noticed it because he was too busy hurrying that 'ere separator along. So I jest stepped aside a little to have a look at what the folks was looking at and then I realized that I could see the front of our wagon and the place where me and Pap had left the mules, but that I couldn't see no mules. So I dont recollect whether I dropped my side of the separator or if Pap dropped hisn or if we still carried it when we come to where we could see out the door and see the mules. They were still there. They were just laying down. Pap had snubbed them right up to the handle of Ike's back door, with the same rein run through both bits, and now they looked jest exactly like two fellows that had done hung themselves in one of these here suicide packs, with their heads snubbed

> up together and their tongues hanging out and their necks stretched about four foot and their legs folded back and under them like shot rabbits until Pap jumped down and cut the harness. Yes, sir. A artist; he had give them to the exact inch jest enough of whatever it was, to get them to town and off the square before it played out. ("Fool About a Horse," 128-129)

> So we went in and give Cain Miz Snopes's rag and he counted the twenty-four sixty-eight and we got the separator and started back to the wagon, to where we had left it. Because it was still there; *the wagon wasn't the trouble. In fact, it was too much wagon.* I mind how I could see the bed and the tops of the wheels where Ab had brought it up close against the loading platform and I could see the folks from the waist up standing in the alley, twice or three times as many of them now, *and I was thinking how it was too much wagon and too much folks; it was like one of these here pictures that have printed under them,* What's wrong with this picture? *and then Ab begun to say 'Hell fire, hell fire' and begun to run, still toting his end of the separator, up to the edge of the platform where we could see under it. The mules was all right too.* They was laying down. Ab had snubbed them up pretty close to the same post [etc]. . . . (*The Hamlet*, 39)

The second account is more humorous than the first because in it Ratliff piques our curiosity earlier and intentionally misleads us before revealing the truth about the mules. Ratliff's first statement about them is puzzling, and requires further explanation, which he witholds to create suspense. Specifically, Ratliff says that "it was too much wagon. . . . it was too much wagon and too little folks; it was like one of these here pictures that have printed under them, *What's wrong with this picture?*" All the time, the reader eagerly anticipates the punch line, that is, the explanation of what actually happened to the mules Ab traded for. The account in "Fool About a Horse" does not signal

trouble until the comparatively straightforward statement, "it was about twice as many folks looking at the team as it had been when we had left it." Moreover, in *The Hamlet*, we are deliberately misled by the assertion that "The mules was all right too," which is undercut when Ratliff adds "They was laying down." The corresponding sentences in the "Fool About a Horse" account ("They were still there. They were just laying down.") do not mislead the reader as humorously. Nevertheless, both passages contain wonderfully cumulative and exaggerated descriptions of the mules' sorry state. It is also worth mentioning that, even though both passages amply illustrate the risks involved in Mississippi horse-trading, the concluding tributes to Jim's ability to disguise a mule to best advantage ironically endorse the sport by showcasing its best talent. No doubt, if young Wall Snopes were listening to the tale, he would not at all mind growing up to be just like Stamper's Jim.

In the spotted horses episode that opens "The Peasants," the fourth and last book of *The Hamlet*, Faulkner's use of southwestern humor to address twentieth-century concerns reaches its peak. Whereas the style of "Fool About a Horse," "The Souring of Ab Snopes," and even the published short story "Spotted Horses" (all told in the first-person by V.K. Suratt/Ratliff) is primarily comic, "The Peasants" relies for its effects on Faulkner's alternation between his comic style and the grand, serious prose one normally associates with such

novels as *Light in August* or *Absalom Absalom!*. To the traditional horse swap scenario Faulkner adds not only the dire economic situation of the poor whites and the resulting tension between aspiration and practicality as he did in "The Souring of Ab Snopes," but both a treatment of his familiar theme of the conflict between inflexible man and the flux of existence, and an elegy chronicling the end of the entertaining pastime of horse-trading as it is taken over by the grasping rapacity and inhuman efficiency of Snopesism.

The differences between "Spotted Horses," the short story Faulkner published in *Scribner's*, and "The Peasants," the version he wrote for *The Hamlet*, are especially enlightening with regard to the writer's debt to and transcendence of southwestern humor. Of most importance is the shift in narration from the Suratt/Ratliff character to the third-person omniscient narrator. In "Spotted Horses," the Mississippi dialect of Suratt/Ratliff creates a recognizable comic tone made up partly of unusual similes, understatement, and exaggeration. In fact, Watkins and Young, in their article on the stylistic changes between the short story and the novel, wonder why Faulkner changed certain striking and vivid details when he came to write "The Peasants." Commenting on the change from "that ere Texas man's boot heels [were] like a couple of walnuts on two strings" ("Spotted Horses," 169) to "a kaleidoscope of inextricable and incredible violence on the periphery of

which the metal clasps of the Texan's suspenders sun-glinted in ceaseless orbit, with terrific slowness across the lot" (*The Hamlet*, 329), they argue that "All the native vividness is lost, and one must wonder why Faulkner thought [the Latinate words] as appropriate as Ratliff's speech"(330). At the end of their article, Watkins and Young conclude that "[Faulkner] has found no adequate vehicle [in the novel] which enables him to portray the local and the individual as vividly as he does in the short stories and at the same time to suggest his created pattern of meaning like that in the novel" (336).

To begin to address Watkins' and Young's concerns, a brief discussion of the style of the frontier tale is in order. Often, this style is used to describe a violent world in which wild animals, natural disasters, or uncouth, unscrupulous men threaten the civilization and indeed the lives of frontier settlers. However, the language used to describe this world rarely matches it. The frontier incidents are described either in the learned, Latinate prose of an observing urbanite or the kinetic prose of exaggeration and outrageous similes of the local raconteur. For example, Longstreet has his narrator describe the demonstration by one horse trader of his commodity's finest qualities thus:

> "Make him pace!" Bob commenced twitching the bridle and kicking at the same time. These inconsistent movements obviously (and most naturally) disconcerted Bullet; for it was impossible for him to learn, from them, whether he was to proceed or stand still. He started to trot--and was told that

wouldn't do. [11]

Of course, one could not imagine the horse's backwoods rider politely telling him that trotting "wouldn't do." The polite, elevated style assures us that the narrator will relate nothing to offend the finest sensibilities of a drawing room gathering. The style also works, perhaps unconsciously on Longstreet's part, to create mock epic effects by elevating the action with elegant language and by embuing the participants with gentlemanly qualities. Nevertheless, the true violence, brutality, and savagery of the frontier world is kept from intruding on the audience.

The same effect arises from the vivid, exuberant style of a writer like George Washington Harris. As Sut Lovingood relates his yarns, his speech creates a world so unlike reality that, once again, the convention that humor must not involve any real pain is, for the most part, adhered to. [12] This style tames the frontier world by defying natural physical laws and endowing its protagonist with either superhuman ability or totally unhuman attributes (such as boot-heels that become walnuts on the end of a string). As Howard rightly notes of the bicycle pump incident in the Ab Snopes episode (132), the circumstances are so far-fetched that we never entertain the notion that the pumped-up horse might be experiencing pain, nor would we consider banning

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[11] "The Horse Swap." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym et al. 4th ed. 2 vols. New York: Norton, 1985. 1: 782.

[12] See Howard's "Huck Finn in the House of Usher," 129, for a fuller discussion of Harris' comic style.

Faulkner for condoning cruelty to animals.

A good example of Faulkner's decision to remove the action of his story from the protective shelter of the comic style is the description in "Spotted Horses" and "The Peasants" of the Texan's attempt to prove the unprovable, namely that a Texas pony is manageable if dealt with properly. The "Spotted Horses" account is presented first:

> Then the dust settled again and there they was, that Texas man and the horse. He had its head twisted clean around like a owl's head. Its legs was braced and it was trembling like a new bride and groaning like a saw mill, and him holding its head wrung clean around on its neck so it was snuffing sky. "Look it over," he says, with his heels dug too and that white pistol sticking outen his pocket and his neck swole up like a spreading adder's until you could just tell what he was saying, cussing the horse and talking to us all at once: "Look him over, the fiddleheaded son of fourteen fathers. Try him, buy him; you will get the best--" Then it was all dust again, and we couldn't see nothing but spotted hide and mane, and that ere Texan man's boot-heels like a couple of walnuts on two strings, and after a while that two gallon hat come sailing out like a fat old hen crossing a fence. ("Spotted Horses," 169).

> Then the Texan's feet came back to earth and the dust blew aside and revealed them, motionless, the Texan's sharp heels braced into the ground, one hand gripping the pony's forelock and the other its nostrils, the long evil muzzle wrung backward over its scarred shoulder while it breathed in labored and hollow groans. . . . "Look him over, boys," the Texan panted, turning his own suffused face and the protuberant glare of his eyes toward the fence. "Look him over quick. Them shoulders and--" He had relaxed for an instant apparently. The animal exploded again; again for an instant the Texan was free of the earth, though he was still talking: "--and legs you whoa I'll tear your face right look him over quick boys worth fifteen dollars of let me get a hold of who'll make me a bid whoa you blare-eyed jack rabbit, whoa!" They were moving now--a kaleidoscope of inextricable and incredible violence on the periphery of which the metal clasps

> of the Texan's suspenders sun-glinted in ceaseless orbit, with terrific slowness across the lot. Then the broad clay-colored hat soared deliberately outward; an instant later the Texan followed it. . . . (*The Hamlet*, 288)

The comically incongruous similes of the first passage defuse the danger of the situation by defamiliarizing both the horse and the Texan, so that they become virtual cartoon figures. In *The Hamlet*'s account, such comic language is left only to the Texan himself, who backs up his conviction that the animals are tameable by confidently addressing them with epithets that reduce their fierceness, such as "blare-eyed jack rabbit" and "broom-tailed hay-burning sidewinders" (272). Faulkner's lengthy sentences and Latinate, polysyllabic nouns, intensified by some of his most characteristic adjectives ("motionless," "ceaseless," "terrific," "incredible;" only "myriad" is missing) heighten the seriousness of the passage and make a truly courageous hero of the Texan, who dares to grapple hand to hoof with the violent flux of life and nature.

The elaborate style Faulkner uses to describe the horses throughout "The Peasants" makes them a complex symbol and perhaps the best representation of the irresistible flux of existence that the author so often wrote about. Like the flooding Mississippi River in "Old Man," the horses are powerful, terrific, independent, unpredictable, irrational, violent, dangerous, and virtually ungovernable despite the humans' best attempts to manage them. Constantly rushing or moiling, they are comic riot figures who, as they rampage

through the domestic confines of Mrs. Littlejohn's boarding house and the soporific peacefulness of the Tull family's wagon, chaotically disrupt the order that men and women try to impose upon life.

Moreover, they are linked in *The Hamlet* with the moon and the fertile resumption of life that spring brings with it. This association is made explicitly clear by Will Varner, the patriarch of Frenchman's Bend who not only remarks that the moon "is good for every growing thing outen earth" (307), but also comments most positively on his countrymen's efforts to chase down their elusive purchases:

> "They are going to come out even on them things after all," Varner said. "They'll get the money back in exercise and relaxation. You take a man that aint got no other relaxation all year long except dodging mule-dung up and down a field furrow . . . something like this is good for him" (308).

As Varner's observations imply, the horses are also a source of entertainment and novelty, a fact reinforced by their association with the circus. They sport on their "harlequin rumps" (273) the motley of clowns, jesters, and "circus posters" (271) and we are told that one of them severs the Texan's vest "as a trick swordsman severs a floating veil with one stroke" (273), a simile which captures well the quickness, spectacle, and potential deadliness they embody.

Nevertheless, the horses are irresistible to the Yoknapatawpha men. Faulkner endows the ponies with supernatural grace, speed, beauty, endurance, and even an eerie silence (broken only by the menacing pistol shots of their hooves), attributes that are compelling to the

enthralled farmers and ploughmen:

> . . . singly or in pairs [the horses] rushed, fluid, phantom and unceasing . . ." (276)
>
> One of the animals emerged [from the group]. It seemed not to gallop but to flow, bodiless, without dimension." (226)

Their infectious appeal is even described at one point as "contagion" (274). As such, they are no longer comic props, but rather all that the Yoknapatawpha men aspire to be, or at least to overcome and tame. As Faulkner said when asked about the spotted horses, "they symbolized hope, the aspiration of the masculine part of society that is capable of doing, of committing puerile folly for some gewgaw that has drawn him." [13]

As Faulkner's statement suggests, the horses do serve important comic functions in the story. As the Texan attempts to convince his prospective buyers to bid on his merchandise (more than once risking life and limb in the attempt), the horses become the focus of the traditional comic incongruities between illusion and reality, truth and falsehood, word and fact, idealism and common sense. Much of the humor in "The Peasants" depends on this unbridgeable gulf between what the Texan says about the horses and what their behavior shows to be true. They are the ultimate challenge to the smooth-talking southwestern horse trader, whose stature is substantially based on his ability to swap the unswapable. His efforts to pull the wool over the

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[13] *Faulkner in the University*, 66.

Yoknapatawphans' eyes and their reaction produce much of the story's humor. On one hand, we laugh at the witty retorts of the unconvinced. After one horse severs the Texan's vest as he attempts to demonstrate its docility, Quick pretends to go along with the deception, but then explodes the illusion with a comically valid concern: "'Sho now, [he agrees.] 'But suppose a man dont happen to own a vest'" (273). On the other hand, we laugh at the absurdity of those Yoknapatawphans who cannot resist the horses' lure despite the chaos and damage they cause. A comic high point is reached in the story when Eck Snopes and his young son Wall come up on the Tulls' overturned wagon: "while the five women shrieked above Tull's unconscious body, Eck and the little boy came up, trotting, Eck still carrying his rope. He was panting. 'Which way'd he go?' he said" (304).

This small scene of Eck and his son pursuing their foolhardy quest in the face of the Tull women's outcries over their stricken father and husband is emblematic of Faulkner's larger concerns in the story, and of his expertise in conveying them. To begin with, the boy Wall plays an important symbolic role in the story, a role that Faulkner expanded when he progressed from the published short story to the novel. Wall represents both the men's "puerile folly" in desiring the horses and their vulnerability in going after them. As his father rebukes the boy for repeatedly slipping into the enclosure to get a better look at the horses, one of the other men rightly

advises Eck, "'If you're going to whip him, you better whip the rest of us too and then one of us can frail hell out of you'" (283). Wall also functions to convey the respect and admiration the men deservedly have for the Texan. Faulkner expresses this reverence by having the boy repeatedly fetch the Texan boxes of ginger snaps, themselves indicators of the Texan's unflappable demeanor and surplus wealth. Finally, being a boy, Wall Snopes embodies the future of Yoknapatawphan masculinity and the perpetuity of its folly and exuberance. The Texan's act of passing the ginger snaps on to Wall after watching Flem take the Armstids' last five dollars signals not only his renunciation of luxury out of sympathy for the impoverishment and humiliation of Mrs. Armstid, but also the inevitibility of the same folly and suffering occurring again in Wall's generation.

The Armstids themselves play a central part in the elegiac aspect of "The Peasants." As other horse swap tales and even as the first half of Faulkner's spotted horses story make clear, the traditional pastime of horse-trading is essentially a game. There are no real losers in the practice, except that a participant might suffer a blow to his pride or exchange a marginally valuable commodity for a worthless one. As long as one risks what has value only as a game piece (such as Beasley's horse, but not Mrs. Snopes' separator), horse-trading remains purely safe and purely comic -- no one really gets hurt. For example, in "The Peasants" Faulkner grants comic immunity to all those

characters, including the Texan, who participate in the auction and the travelling show with a truly sportsmanlike detachment and flexibility, even to the point of allowing the most physically vulnerable player, Wall, to escape unscathed when the horses explode out of their stable in a scene that finds its way only into *The Hamlet*'s version of the story:

> "Hell fire," one of [the men trying to feed the horses] said. "Jump!" he shouted. The three turned and ran frantically for the wagon, Eck last. Several voices from the fence were now shouting something but Eck did not even hear them until, in the act of scrambling madly at the tail gate, he looked behind him and saw the little boy still leaning to the knot-hole in the door which in the next instant vanished into matchwood, the knot-hole itself exploding from his eye and leaving him, motionless in the diminutive overalls and still leaning forward a little until he vanished utterly beneath the towering parti-colored wave full of feet and glaring eyes and wild teeth which, overtopping, burst into scattering units, revealing at last the gaping orifice and the little boy still standing in it, unscathed, his eye still leaned to the vanished knot hole. (283)

When Faulkner introduces Henry Armstid to the scene, however, he brings in a character whose inflexibility and economic vulnerability would normally bar him from the game, but whose fierce pride and prolonged deprivation compels him to want to take part. Henry Armstid is one of Faulkner's many characters who, driven to insanity by economic hardship, madly pretend that they are no different from their prosperous neighbors. They insist on their right to behave like normal people with a violence that intimidates those around them into permitting it. Thus, Henry insists that the five dollars he has taken from his wife's meager

savings qualifies him to participate in the auction in order to maintain the appearance that his family is no poorer than any other. In the plight of Henry Armstid, Faulkner presents a deadly serious variation on the old horse swap motif of trying to prove the unprovable.

With the introduction of women to the situation, particularly Mrs. Armstid and Mrs. Littlejohn, Faulkner continues a trend he started in "The Souring of Ab Snopes" earlier in the novel. Like Mrs. Snopes, Mrs. Littlejohn is all too plainly aware of the potential for suffering and injury inherent in horse-trading, especially given the fact that the Yoknapatawphan men are not the Pat Stampers they aspire to be. One of the most significant changes Faulkner made to "Spotted Horses" when he wrote *The Hamlet*, along with the introduction of the serious prose style to express the sinister beauty of the horses, was the insertion to the scenes describing the horses' stunts in the corral (and the men's fascination with them) of the contrapuntal descriptions of Mrs. Littlejohn looking on as she tends to her domestic duties as proprietress of the boarding house. In the midst of the account of the Texan's attempts to subdue one of the horses, for instance, Faulkner cuts away from the action to show Mrs. Littlejohn's perspective:

> . . . the Texan's sharp heels braced into the ground, one hand gripping the pony's forelock and the other its nostrils. . . . Mrs. Littlejohn was in the yard again. No one had seen her emerge this time. She carried an armload of clothing and a metal-ridged washboard and she was standing motionless at the kitchen steps, looking into the lot. Then she moved across the yard, still looking

> into the lot, and dumped the garments into the tub, still looking into the lot. (288)

Similar focus on Mrs. Littlejohn's concerned watchfulness is always made when the action in the corral grows especially violent and dangerous. Mrs. Littlejohn, like many of Faulkner's women, represents common sense and the concern for safety and well-being that the aspirant, but often foolhardy, men lack. Valuing attributes antithetical to those admired by the men they love, stability, domesticity, practicality, reason, women like Mrs. Armstid and Mrs. Littlejohn eventually become the chief losers in the men's doomed efforts to rise above the tedium and humiliation that the deteriorated South offers them.

This sad fact is painfully expressed by Faulkner in the image of Mrs. Armstid waiting in the family's wagon for her husband's inevitable demise to happen:

> The husband, Henry, stood beside the post on which the Texan sat. The wife [14]had gone back to the wagon, where she sat gray in the gray garment, motionless, looking at nothing still; she might have been something inanimate which he had loaded into the wagon to move it somewhere, waiting now in the wagon until he should be ready to go on again, patient, insensate, timeless. (293)

Faulkner's description of Mrs. Armstid's reaction to Flem's inhumanly callous and inadequate offer of five cents' worth of candy as compensation for the five dollars he has taken from her is equally distant from the painless comic universe of traditional southwestern humor:

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[14]In "Spotted Horses" Faulkner calls the two characters "Henry" and "Mrs. Armstid." By calling them "the husband" and "the wife," he has universalized the scene.

> "You're right kind," she said. . . . "I reckon I better get on and help with dinner," she said. She descended the steps, though as soon as she reached the level earth and began to retreat, the gray folds of the garment once more lost all inference and intimation of locomotion, so that she seemed to progress without motion like a figure on a retreating and diminishing float; a gray and blasted tree trunk moving, somehow intact and upright, upon an unhurried flood. (317)

The epitome of the Faulknerian patient Griselda, Mrs. Armstid is broken, faded, almost lifeless, yet enduring. As her figure diminishes into the "ultimate dust" Faulkner mentions often in the novel's version of the story (275, for example), she is an even more universally pathetic figure than was Ab or Vynie Snopes earlier in the novel.

The chief cause of Mrs. Armstid's grief and humiliation is not, however, the auction of the spotted horses or even her inflexibly proud husband, but Flem Snopes. Flem has altered the rules of horse-trading and, in doing so, its spirit, with the result that his rise to prominence signals the end of an era in Yoknapatawpha community life. First, Flem removes himself from overt involvement in the trading process by hiring a front man, the Texan, to do his talking for him. Second, Flem trades for cash. Consquently, he knows exactly what he is getting in exchange for his goods, in contrast to traditional contests in which half of the trader's skill lay in his ability to convince a skeptical opponent that what he was putting up for trade had some value. Since the Yoknapatawphans are giving up cash, a known quantity, this creative aspect of the conventional swap has

been eliminated. Finally, Flem unscrupulously, in direct contrast to the Texan, who belongs to the old school of horse-trading, allows anyone with cash to participate, even if, as in Henry Armstid's case, true suffering and deprivation result. Whereas Pat Stamper and Jim had won out with superhuman trading skill in "The Souring of Ab Snopes," Flem succeeds by means of monstrous heartlessness. The element of game and true sport has been removed.

As Ratliff laments to his friend Odum Bookwright at the end of the spotted horses episode in "The Peasants," he, Ratliff, "wasn't even protecting a people from a Snopes. [He] was protecting something that dont want nothing but to walk and feel the sun and wouldn't know how to hurt no man even if it could," the sociable, humorous, and human spectacle of the southwestern horse swap (321).

II. Anse Bundren and Vernon Tull: Comic Hypocrisy and Comic Spirit in *As I Lay Dying*

Perhaps no other work in literature can match *As I Lay Dying* for the range and variety of its humor. Faulkner manages to incorporate in his "tour de force" elements of comic irony, black humor, classical comedy, ritual comedy, physical humor, satire, and southwestern folk humor. Accordingly, the novel's comic effects have drawn a fair amount of critical attention [1] although by no means have these effects been fully described or explained in the critical discussions of *As I Lay Dying*'s comedy. One area that has drawn some attention, particularly from Patricia Schroeder, is the comic nature of Anse Bundren. She, and Robert Kirk before her, [2] see Anse as *As I Lay Dying*'s comic hero, a twentieth-century version of the shrewd, resilient protagonist of southwestern humor. I intend to show that, on the contrary, Anse is at best a villainous parody of the frontier trickster. One area that has not received attention is the sustaining folk wit that infuses the speech and thought of the poor white farmers of Yoknapatawpha County who witness and remark upon the outrageous exploits of the Bundren family members in their quest to bury Addie

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[1] For two specific discussions of the comedy in *As I Lay Dying* , see Patricia R. Schroeder, "The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*." *Faulkner and Humor: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha, 1984.* Ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson and London: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1986. 34-46; and Fred Miller Robinson's chapter on the novel in *The Comedy of Language: Studies in Modern Comic Literature.* Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980.

[2] "Faulkner's Anse Bundren." *Georgia Review* 19 (Winter 1965): 446-52.

Bundren's troublesome corpse. This wit is particularly evident in the sections narrated by Vernon Tull, the Bundrens' helpful, resilient neighbor, who, I will argue, embodies the true comic spirit to be found not only in *As I Lay Dying*, but in all of Faulkner's comic works.

It will be helpful to begin with a general summary and discussion of the different kinds of comedy *As I Lay Dying* exhibits. One basic source of the novel's humor, as Michael Millgate has observed in *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (London: Constable, 1966), is "the frequency with which characters are completely mistaken in their judgments of each other, and of themselves" (106). Cora Tull's estimation of Jewel (the illegitimate son of Addie and Reverend Whitfield), for example, as a "Bundren through and through, loving nobody, caring for nothing except how to get something with the least amount of work" [3] is utterly wrong and reminiscent of the sort of unfounded and ridiculous opinions that Mrs. Bennet boldly asserts in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Such irony is an inevitable result of Faulkner's use of multiple narration and has led more than one critic to view the novel as an "absurd joke," [4] a position tenable only if, like Mrs. Bennet's cynical husband, the reader maintains a cool detachment from the novel's action and characters. It

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[3] *As I Lay Dying* in *William Faulkner: Novels 1930 - 1935*. Ed. Joseph Blotner and Noel Polk. New York: The Library of America, 1985. 15. All further references to this book appear in the text.

[4] Edmund Volpe, *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner*. New York: Noonday Press, 1964. 126.

is true that the characters' motives and assumptions are often as inconsistent and erroneous as their actions are bizarre, but it is a mistake to believe, as Edmund Volpe apparently does, that the reader "remains detached because the fifty-nine short interior monologues that are used to tell the story permit [the reader] to identify with no single character . . ." (127). On the contrary, precisely because Faulkner allows the reader, by means of the monologues, to understand reasonably well the concerns and motivations of many characters, sympathy with those characters who often seem the most absurd is poignantly evoked. One glimpse into Vardaman's troubled consciousness, for example, is enough to preclude any humorous reaction one might have to the low comedy of the boy's seemingly endless attempts to drive the vultures from the vicinity of Addie's coffin. As Henri Bergson notes in his treatise on comedy, laughter "has no greater foe" than emotional involvement. [5] Therefore, any ironically comic effects arising from a character's misconceptions, which the reader perceives from a god-like vantage point, are offset by the pity and compassion attendant upon the direct, sympathetic involvement in the character's turmoil that that same god-like omniscience provides. We see too far into the hearts of most characters to dismiss them as merely absurd.

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[5] *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* Trans. Cloudsley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. London: Macmillan, 1911. 4.

Similarly conflicting feelings result from the grotesque humor in *As I Lay Dying*. This comedy, containing some element of pain, death, and even mutilation, centers on Addie's decomposing corpse, Cash's broken leg, and the treatment that both receive at the hands of the Bundren family. In most cases, the humor arises from the incongruity between the utter grotesqueness of an act and the characters' familiar, unsurprised attitudes toward it. Olga Vickery describes this aspect of the black humor in *As I Lay Dying* best:

> This intermingling of humor and horror, which is part of the very texture of *As I Lay Dying*, issues out of the Bundren's conviction that their actions are eminently reasonable and out of the spectators' [and reader's] conviction that the Bundrens and their coffin have long since passed beyond the realm of reason, logic, or even common sense. [6]

Although the grotesque subject matter is repulsive, the manner in which Faulkner conveys it overrides the horror with humor. Often in the novel, the unprepared reader is ambushed by a particularly unusual act and an accompanying attitude of nonchalance. The first encounter with black humor in the novel, Cash's unconventional expression of love for his dying mother and her approval of it, hinges on this technique of shocking the unsuspecting reader. In the opening section, the narrator Darl first tells us that he hears Cash's saw; then Darl describes Cash standing in a "litter of chips . . . fitting two boards together" (3), following that first with praise for Cash as "a good

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[6] *The Novels of William Faulkner*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1964. 65.

carpenter" (3), and then with the vague description of Cash's project as a "box" (3). Finally, we are told in a surprising qualifying phrase preceded by a seemingly innocent main clause, that "Addie Bundren could not want a better one, a better box to lie in" (4). The oddity of Darl's unsurprised assumption of the good sense of Cash's behavior and his calm assertion that the dead Addie will gain "confidence and comfort" (4) from her own coffin also contribute to the black humor of the passage. The baffled reader is left at the end of the section with no further explanation, only the comparative reticence of the "Chuck. Chuck. Chuck." of Cash's adze, a reinforcement of his perserverance in finishing his unusual project. This Kafkaesque humor, in which the casual assumptions about bizarre occurrences conflict with the reader's expectations of how the characters ought to react, recurs throughout *As I Lay Dying*, as, for example, when Darl draws Vardaman aside to hear Addie's corpse "talking" (144) as it decomposes.

The grotesque humor in the novel is really only one manifestation of a larger comic pattern. This pattern is based on a given character's excessive adherence to an idea or a mode of behavior in the face of increasingly overwhelming evidence that the idea or behavior utterly flouts either common sense or traditionally accepted norms of conduct. Panthea Reid Broughton describes this quintessentially Faulknerian phenomenon as "Becoming Impervious to Actuality," (41) a phrase she uses as a

chapter subtitle in her enlightening book, *William Faulkner: The Abstract and the Actual*. [7] Fred Miller Robinson, in perhaps the best essay written on the comedy in *As I Lay Dying*, discusses the same motif, calling it the "dissolving of form" (57), and cites Cora Tull, who persistently dwells on the banal facts of egg economy at the bedside of her dying neighbor, as an example of a character who adheres to an idea no matter how inappropriate it is to present circumstances.

Cash Bundren is perhaps the best example of a character who becomes impervious to reality in tenaciously pursuing a fixed idea. When confronted with the incontestable fact of the pain involved in the removal of the cement cast (and the flesh adhering to it) from his leg, and with Peabody's vehement prohibition, "'Don't you lie there and try to tell me you rode six days on a wagon without springs, with a broken leg and it never bothered you,'" Cash laconically responds, "'It never bothered me much'" (162). This gross understatement of the physical truth of the situation (made evident by Peabody's observation that "sweat big as marbles" [162] stood on Cash's forehead) draws attention to a central concern presented by Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*: at what point does endurance, persistence, and courage become obsession and unreasonable foolhardiness? Is Cash merely an obtuse, backwoods yokel, a subhumanly passive sufferer, who blindly accepts his ignorant family's downhome horse

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[7] Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1974.

doctoring? Not at all. As evidence from the text shows, he has an unusual capacity for alleviating the suffering of others through his own suffering. When Jewel becomes unable to perform his share of the work on the farm because of his nightly efforts to raise money to buy a horse, Cash assumes Jewel's workload without a word of complaint, self-pity, or self-congratulation. With respect to the treatment his leg receives at the hands of Anse, Darl, and Jewel, Cash responds by absolving them of any blame; he tells Peabody, "'They just aimed to ease hit some'" (162). Cash's heroic tolerance and his unselfish, quiet sacrifices for others are almost Christ-like (Cash too is a carpenter) and place him on a par with Faulkner's most famous selfless character, Dilsey. Nevertheless, unlike Dilsey's situation, humor informs Cash's predicament and contributes to the reader's astonished wonder in fulfillment of the novel's essentially comic purpose, as Patricia Schroeder defines it, "to celebrate the indefatigable in man" (34).

In her recent essay, "The Comic World of *As I Lay Dying*," Schroeder asserts that there are distinct parallels between the comedy in Faulkner's novel and classical comedy, which, she explains,

> celebrates community survival, applauds the status quo, and affirms life in the face of death. . . . The action of classical comedy concerns the incorporation of the comic hero into his society at large. Moving from one social center to another, the hero . . . overcomes obstacles to win his heroine and so join the community.(35)

Schroeder sees Anse as the "comic hero" of *As I Lay Dying*

(35), fulfilling his quest to bury Addie and to secure another wife by overcoming obstacles and expelling the *pharmakos* Darl, "a scapegoat for the forces of dissension within the society" (35). Schroeder observes parallels between Anse and classical comedy and between Anse and southwestern folk humor, in which a clever trickster protagonist, disguising his shrewdness in ineptitude, dupes unwitting fools.

There are too many problems with Schroeder's argument, however, for it to be convincing. Anse's climactic marriage to the "duck-shaped woman" (177) is, at best, a hollow and ironic parody of the classical comedy exhibited by, say, *As You Like It*, in which the new social order triumphs over those members of the established order unwilling to relinquish their authority to the young protagonists. Anse is no Orlando, nor is Darl the usurping "dissension within society," Frederick. On the contrary, Darl is an agent (albeit an imperfect one), of truth in *As I Lay Dying*. He is right both early in the novel in wanting to correct Jewel's vehement conviction that Addie is not going to die, and late in the novel in trying to bring to an end the absurdity of carrying on to Jefferson under the false pretense of fulfilling Addie's revengeful wish. Darl goes wrong, becomes antisocial, only in the means he uses to achieve his ends: he cruelly taunts Jewel (*"Jewel, I say, she is dead, Jewel. Addie Bundren is dead"*[35]) and tries to burn down Gillespie's barn. Only in this respect could Darl be

described as the *pharmakos*.

Schroeder's assertion that Anse is the "comic hero" because of his affinities with the protagonists of southwestern folk tales is equally flawed. The southwestern hero (such as the Virginian), like the heroes of classical comedy, is a champion of common sense and unschooled intelligence who usually plays a trick on an educated but gullible easterner. He shows up folly and pretentiousness, and, in doing so, promotes common sense and equality. The foolish person who, for instance, swallows the exaggerations of the tall tale deserves correction. Anse performs no such comic function. He is an embodiment of the worst kind of humor in which an innocent and vulnerable person is victimized by the trickster rather than shown to be too gullible or too impractical by means of painless mirth. Anse resembles more the characters in Chaucer's "Reeve's Tale," whose "comic" exploits rely on violence, viciousness, theft, and rape more than on wit and ingenuity. This "humor" finds its way into *As I Lay Dying* in the person of the unscrupulous drugstore clerk MacGowan, whose "duping" of Dewey Dell is nothing less than sickening. Schroeder's contention that "Anse *genially* manipulates the members of his family and his rural society, and functions as a rather *mild* but nonetheless effective scourge of fools" (39, emphasis added) betrays heartlessness worthy of Anse himself. Anse's appropriation of Jewel's horse, Cash's savings, and Dewey Dell's ten dollars is hardly "mild" or

corrective. In fact, Anse is the embodiment of antisocial behavior, of the anti-comic, a perversion of folk wit and intelligence who operates only under the guise of the socially conscious comic hero. Cleanth Brooks' appraisal of Anse captures this perversity well, and still remains the truest evaluation of his character: ". . . one of Faulkner's most accomplished villains. . . . He represents a force probably necessary to the survival of the human animal though it is terrifying when seen in such simple purity." [8]

The many appearances Anse attempts to maintain throughout the novel are illuminating with respect to the comedy of *As I Lay Dying*. Anse is a hypocrite, and as Moliere wrote in 1667, "all lying, disguise, cheating, dissimulation, all outward show different from reality, all contradiction between actions that proceed from a single source . . . is in essence comic." Although Moliere's observation is an overstatement, Anse's hypocrisy often does make him the butt of laughter rather than the "comic hero," and rivals *Martin Chuzzlewit*'s Mr. Pecksniff in its extensiveness. He pretends, for instance, to be a loving husband and a man of his word dutiful to his wife's dying wish: "'I promised my word me and the boys would get her there quick as mules could walk it, so she could rest quiet'" (13); he pretends to be considerate: "'I wouldn't upset her for the living world'" (13); he pretends to be distracted with grief: "Seems like I cant get my mind on

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[8] *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1963. 154-155.

nothing" (22); he pretends to be a diligent provider for his family: "'I always is fed me and mine and kept a roof above us" (24); he even pretends to be hospitable, chastising Addie for wanting Peabody to leave her alone: "'Now Addie, . . . when he come all the way from Jefferson to get you well'" (31). Above all, Anse presents himself as a sort of model of Christian behavior, a long-suffering, ill-used, luckless, but unbegrudging, patient, and humbly pious Job: "I am not religious, I reckon. But peace is in my heart: I know it is. I have done things but neither better nor worse than them that pretend otherlike, and I know that Old Marster will care for me as for ere a sparrow that falls" (25-26). At times, Anse's deference to God becomes a convenient cover for his desire to evade responsibility: "God's will be done. . . . Now I can get them teeth" (35). Anse maintains these carefully nurtured (but, to Darl and to the reader, transparent) appearances even in his monologues. Apparently, Darl's speculation about his father's claim that sweat will kill him, "I suppose he believes it" (12), applies equally well to Anse's hypocritical posturing in general.

Of course, behind these fronts, Anse is unscrupulous, selfish, and manipulative. He is an ingenious con artist, often using the ploy of verbal denial to play on his victim's generosity and sense of Christian duty, as when he tries to coax Vernon Tull to lend him a mule: "'I aint asking it of you, . . . I can always do for me and mine. I

aint asking you to risk your mule. It aint your dead; I am not blaming you'" (90). Similarly, Anse drops a pious hint to Vernon about helping with the completion of the coffin when he tells Cash, "'There is Christians enough to help you'"(34). Apparently, those Christians do not include Anse himself, who stands idly by as the coffin is being built. Another trick is evident here. Anse often verbally effaces himself from situations in which either the Bundren family or he himself requires help. The stress in the example above is placed on Vernon helping *Cash* rather than Anse, although Anse is as eager to have the coffin finished (in order to set out to purchase "them teeth") as Cash is. In the same way, Anse more than once forces his sons to appear to make his decisions for him, thus absolving himself from any blame if a decision does not turn out to best advantage. In the opening sections, Anse wants both the three dollars his sons' work will bring in and the appearance of being ready to fulfill Addie's wish at the first opportunity, a goal he achieves by having Darl and Jewel make on their own the decision to set out, with only the least amount of coaxing from their father. Significantly, when Darl and Jewel are delayed by the storm, Anse's response is "'Durn them *boys*'" (33; emphasis added).

Just as the epitome of Anse's hypocrisy is the fact that he keeps up appearances even in his monologues, so is the epitome of his antisocial, anti-comic nature his refrain that he will "be beholden" (75) to no man. Typically, Anse

is operating under the guise of the self-reliant, considerate Christian who would rarely impose his or her own needs on a stranger, especially in a family matter. This attitude is sincerely held by Cash and by Jewel, although in the latter's case the self-reliance is a manifestation of fierce, irascible pride, not of Christian consideration. Nevertheless, Anse essentally does refuse to be beholden to his fellow man. He has neither emotional ties nor fellow-feeling for anyone, but uses his neighbors and family only to facilitate his own selfish ends. As such, Anse may be viewed as the prototype for Flem Snopes, the symbol of heartlessly acquisitive twentieth-century man in *The Hamlet*. Like Flem, Anse represents a potent but soulless and perverted caricature of the frontier comic spirit.

The antitheses of Anse Bundren, the truly comic figures in *As I Lay Dying* are the poor white farmers of Yoknapatawpha County, who display true community and true comic spirit. They have been called the novel's "chorus," [9] touchstones of common sense who underscore the outrageousness of the Bundren's quest; however, they play a more impotant role than that, as one critic, Fred Miller Robinson, has partly shown. Robinson's essay on the comedy of language in *As I Lay Dying* convincingly argues the thesis that in the novel,

> [Faulkner] is constantly observing "forms" of all kinds dissolved: objective forms like trees and bridges, and forms constructed by the mind, whether

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[9] Andre Bleikasten, *Faulkner's* As I Lay Dying. Revised edition. Trans. Roger Little. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 54.

> promises made, duties imagined, or words shaped, the forms that mental and verbal life take. . . . [Faulkner expresses] their dissolution as comic irony, showing how etiolated forms are when compared to the exhuberant, chaotic reality that bears them away.(53)

Robinson also argues that, paradoxically, *As I Lay Dying* expresses "the joy of shaping [forms] in the face of dissolution" (56); he asserts that "the shaping of form is celebrated in *As I Lay Dying* just as it is revealed as illusory . . . " (56).

In proving his thesis, Robinson presents Vernon Tull as an example of a character whose shaping of form is celebrated, and calls attention to an overlooked passage from one of Tull's monologues:

> When I looked back at my mule it was like he was one of these here spy-glasses and I could look at him standing there and see all the broad land and my house sweated out of it like it was the more the sweat, the broader the land; the more the sweat, the tighter the house because it would take a tight house for Cora, to hold Cora like a jar of milk in the spring: you've got to have a tight jar or you'll need a powerful spring [whose cold, fast-flowing water will help to keep the milk from souring], so if you have a big spring, why then you have the incentive to have tight, wellmade jars, because it is your milk sour or not, because you would rather have milk that will sour than to have milk that wont, because you are a man.(91)

In this passage, Robinson argues, "What Tull does is celebrate, lyrically, the creation of forms that are a function of the strength of reality to dissolve them, pry them open, ruin them. Tull's jars are tight and well-made because they are so threatened" (74). Robinson's explication of the passage is insightful. This is the true comic spirit in Faulkner, the celebration of the indefatigable person who

stands up against Circumstance, endures it, and once in a while prevails over it.

An important aspect of this comic triumph, particularly in Tull's case, is that the achievement is spontaneous and unselfconscious, catching him as much by surprise as any observer, including the reader. In his account of helping Vardaman to cross the bridge, Tull describes only the start of their crossing and his feelings once they have completed the crossing. Characteristically, Vernon expresses surprise and wonder at his own courage:

> It was like when we was across, up out of the water again and the hard earth under us, that I was surprised. It was like we hadn't expected the bridge to end on the other bank, on something like the hard earth again that we had tromped on before this time and knowed well. Like it couldn't be me here, because I'd have had better sense than to do what I just done. And when I looked back and saw the other bank and saw my mule standing there where I used to be and knew I'd have to get back there someway, I knew it couldn't be, because I just couldn't think of anything that could make me cross that bridge ever even once. Yet here I was, and the fellow that could make himself cross it twice couldn't be me, not even if Cora told him to. (90-91)

True to his character, Tull gives all the credit for the feat to Vardaman and humbly neglects to credit fully his own compassion for the boy, which is the real source of Tull's courage; "It was that boy" (91), Tull asserts. In fact, Vernon is the only character, apart perhaps from Dewey Dell, who feels any real pity for Vardaman or who attempts to help him. When Peabody expresses a wish to know just where Vardaman was when his horses bolted, Vernon declares that he will make up for any damage the boy might have caused to the

wagon: "'If it's broke anywhere, I'll fix it'" (55).

Tull's language is as remarkable as his compassion and understated courage. This language, a form of the Mississippi dialect for which Faulkner had a virtuoso's ear, stands in direct contrast to the dead, "no good" words Addie speaks of in her monologue (115). Tull's speech is rich in coinages, fresh similes, and figures of speech, as he strives to express in words the remarkable incidents he finds himself involved in, especially the river crossing:

> "You ought to let them taken your mule," [Anse] says,and the bridge shaking and swaying under us, going down into the moiling water like it went clean through to the other side of the earth, and the other end coming up outen the water like it wasn't the same bridge a-tall and that them that would walk up outen the water on that side must come from the bottom of the earth. But it was still whole; you could tell that by the way when this end swagged, it didn't look like the other end swagged at all: just like the other trees and the bank yonder were swinging back and forth slow like on a big clock. (90)

Vernon's description of the search for Cash's tools is another excellent example of his descriptive style:

> We could watch the rope cutting down into the water, and we could feel the weight of the wagon kind of blump and lunge laze like, like it just as soon as not, and that rope cutting down into the water hard as an iron bar. . . . Like it was a straight iron bar stuck into the bottom and us holding the end of it, and the wagon lazing up and down, kind of pushing and prodding at us like it had come around and got behind us, lazy like, like it just as soon as not when it made up its mind. (104)

In both examples, Faulkner's debt to the style of the tall tale, particularly the style of George Washington Harris, is evident. F.O. Matthiesen has described Harris' style well, observing that "Harris possesses on the comic level

something of what Melville does on the tragic, the rare kind of dramatic imagination that can get movement directly into words. This brings a wonderfully kinetic quality to whole situations. . . . "[10] Tull's descriptions depend heavily for their "kinetic quality" on present participles ("shaking," "swaying," "pushing and prodding").The use of the present tense to describe past action, a common feature of oral narration, enhances too the action and immediacy of the first passage. Vividness is achieved in both passages with coined words, such as "swagged," a combination of swayed, wagged, and sagged, and with the personification of the unmanageable wagon as doing what it pleases and refusing to be rushed or coerced.

The accounts also display features of spontaneous oral narration. The clauses are piled up chronologically and held together with only the coordinating conjunction "and." The impression of spontaneity is also effected by the phrase "kind of," an indication of the narrator's search for a suitable form of expression. Finally, the exaggeration apparent in the simile "like it went clean through to the other side of the earth" not only reflects the tall tale's hyperbole, but adds epic stature and significance to the characters' contest with Faulkner's symbol of the untamed flux of life, the rising river.

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[10]Cited by M. Thomas Inge in "William Faulkner and George Washington Harris." *The Frontier Humorists: Critical Views.* Ed. M. Thomas Inge. Hamden: Archon, 1975. 269.

This vivid language of Tull's combines with his shrewd powers of observation, early in the novel, to define Anse Bundren's true character and to show up his hypocrisy. Humor often arises from the fact that one of Tull's fanciful descriptions expresses the truth of a given situation. Tull describes Vardaman's fish as "hiding into the dust like it was ashamed of being dead, like it was in a hurry to get back hid again" (21). The fish almost becomes an animated cartoon character here, despite the serious overtones of Tull's personification of it. Tull describes Anse's histrionic approach to Addie's death bed in a similar way:

> When we go up to the hall we can hear [Anse's brogans] clumping on the floor like they was iron shoes. He comes toward the door where she is, blinking his eyes, kind of looking ahead of hisself before he sees, like he is hoping to find her setting up, in a chair maybe or maybe sweeping, and looks into the door in that surprised way like he looks in and finds her in bed every time. . . . He looks around, blinking, in that surprised way, like he had wore hisself down being surprised and was even surprised at that.(22)

Anse tries to look hopeful to put forth the image of a loving husband who cannot bear to see his companion in life leave him, but in fact it would be just like him to hope that she would jump up out of her death bed to avoid inconveniencing him by depriving him of a hand to work the farm. With respect to Anse's show of being surprised to the point of fatigue to find Addie dying (a pose intended to evoke sympathy for the long-suffering but still hopeful husband for whom his wife's illness is a shock every time he sees it), one might well ask, "Who but Anse could exhaust

himself by merely being surprised?"

At times, Tull's descriptons of Anse take a humorously witty turn. Leaving the Bundren farm, Tull observes, "'Poor Anse, . . . She kept him at work for thirty odd years. I reckon she is tired'" (23). The reversal of expectation that nevertheless expresses truth (getting Anse to work for thirty years *is* a Herculean feat and a burden on Addie much more than on her husband) is a feature of Yoknapatawphan wit. The technique resembles Donne's metaphysical wit in that it relies on rescuing a valid observation from an apparently false statement, as in the veterinarian Uncle Billy's remark about the relative wisdom of men and animals: "a man aint so different from a horse or a mule, come long come short, except a mule or a horse has got a little more sense" (124).

One of Vernon's funniest but most poignant passages is his vision of Cora taking over for God in heaven:

> I reckon she's right [about her assured reward from heaven]. I reckon if there's ere a man or woman anywhere that He could turn it all over to and go away with His mind at rest, it would be Cora. And I reckon she would make a few changes, no matter how He was running it. And I reckon they would be for man's good. Leastways, we would have to like them. Leastways, we might as well go on and make like we did.(48)

Once again, an apparent exaggeration, a brief tall tale, expresses truth. Cora is so self-righteous and judgemental that in effect she does take upon herself some of God's work. Tull's personification of God as being as tried and troubled as the average Yoknapatawphan also contributes to

the passage's humor. So do the two qualifying sentences at the end, which comically underscore the resigned suffering of the common Yoknapatawphan in the face of ungovernable circumstances. These last two sentences show Faulkner's excellent sense of comic timing; hope and contentment are whittled away incrementally as, one after another, apparently conclusive statements are qualified for the worse when Tull realises the implications of his vision of Cora as God.[11]

Vernon Tull's wit, courage, compassion, and comic resignation make him a moderating, corrective force in *As I Lay Dying*. He possesses the best characteristics of the Bundrens without their flaws. He has Jewel's determination and courage without being dangerously and obsessively hell-bent on accomplishing his tasks. He is perceptive like Darl (especially of Anse), but refuses to allow his knowledge of life's absurdities to drive him mad. He has Anse's shrewdness without his heartless selfishness and, in his speech, Tull is spontaneous, expressive, and vivid, an antidote to Addie's problem with dead language. In Vernon Tull Faulkner captures the true folk spirit of the South and offers a positive, comic alternative to the Bundrens' tragic situation.

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[11]The elevation of Cora this way and the corresponding demotion of God exhibit an epically comic revearsal that Faulkner would use again in *The Hamlet* in which he has V.K.Ratliff imagine Flem Snopes outwitting Satan himself.

III. Three Yoknapatawphan Wits: Jason Compson, Uncle Job, and Doc Peabody

Despite their obvious differences of race, social background, or economic situation, many inhabitants of Faulkner's fictional world, including Vernon Tull, have one trait in common: a marked proficiency in verbal shrewdness and wit. Many characters, particularly rural ones, are accomplished ironists, riddlers, mockers, and tricksters. This verbal wit has a variety of uses for the Yoknapatawphans who employ it: it can be amusing entertainment, searing social commentary, a gentle form of correction, a vicious offensive weapon, and even one of those sustaining props and pillars that Faulkner spoke about in his Nobel prize address. The extent to which Yoknapatawphan wit can be used either positively or negatively is evident in the speech of three radically dissimilar characters: Jason Compson and Uncle Job from *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*'s Doc Peabody, all of whom employ a brand of humor similar in tone and technique but entirely different in intent and spirit. In these three characters, the serious moral and social implications of Faulkner's comedy emerge as he demonstrates the most constructive and destructive aspects of laughter and humor.

In creating Jason Compson, Faulkner combined relatively early in his career the two types of comic characters who would appear individually in his later works: the wise fool, exemplified by V.K.Ratliff, whose witty humor actively

corrects or shows up the truly foolish behavior of those around him; and the outraged buffoon, exemplified by the tall convict in "Old Man," whose carefully structured and sometimes obsessive existence is disrupted by a chaotic but seemingly malevolent series of events. The two fools differ significantly in that the witty fool, easy, wise, flexible, and social, has almost complete control of his own comic situation, whereas the outraged buffoon, intense, irascible, and private, has his situation "controlled" for him. The wise fool corrects aberrant behavior, the buffoon has his own behavior challenged; the former laughs, the latter is laughed at.

Jason Compson possesses qualities of both types of comic figures, although not in equal proportion. A malevolent variation of the frontier trickster (as is Anse Bundren), he has the verbal and intellectual skills of the wise fool, but lacks his controlling conscience and good will. For this reason, although truth often informs Jason's wit, neither mirth nor compassion ever do. Like Faulkner's buffoons, Jason places too much value on order and structure, a mistake that leads to increasing frustration as reality fails to meet the expectations he has of how life ought to unfold for a man with his social background. As this frustration mounts, Jason eventually becomes less a comic initiator and more the butt of his own schemes and machinations.

Jason's specific affinity with the Yoknapatawphan wits lies in the fact that he is acutely attuned to language, especially ambiguous expression, incongruous expression, and verbal insincerity. He listens carefully, as all Yoknapatawphan traders and wits do, to exactly what a person talking to him says regardless of what that person means to say. The result of such keen attention to a person's speech is often a witty retort in which the person's foolish words or empty rhetoric are mocked and debunked. Mrs. Compson falls victim to this verbal chastisement over and over again as Jason undercuts her high-flown laments with uncompromising cynicism:

> . . . then she cried more and kept saying my poor afflicted baby [Benjy] and I says yes he'll be quite a help to you when he gets his growth not being more than one and a half times as high as me now and she says she'd be dead soon and then we'd all be better off and so I says all right, all right, have it your way. It's your grandchild, which is more than any other grandparent its got can say for certain. . . . Mother kept on saying thank God you are not a Compson exept in name, because you are all I have left now, you and Uncle Maury and I says well I could spare Uncle Maury myself. . . . (196) [1]

In this dialogue two distinct degrees of awareness and two distinct styles of speech emerge. Mrs. Compson's pretensions to gentility are accompanied by melodramatic overstatement and the histrionic exclamations of a southern belle whose finer nature has been callously exposed to the meanness of an inconsiderate world. Her latinate lament "my poor *afflicted* baby" (emphasis added) contrasts sharply with the

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[1] All quotations from *The Sound and the Fury* are taken from Noel Polk's "New Corrected Edition." New York: Random House, 1984.

colloquial, chatty tone of Jason's mocking response, which he creates by using the expressions "to be a help to someone" and "to get one's growth." Similarly, Jason counters his mother's invocation of the Old South's chivalric code of helping a lady in distress, "You are all that I have left now, you and Uncle Maury," with the common sense of a countrified farmer: "well I could spare Uncle Maury myself." Jason's pose here is all politeness. The "well" reflects the countryman's way of easing into a statement that corrects or opposes his interlocutor's; the "myself" reflects his humility in hesitating to speak for all people; the subjunctive "could" implies that his assertion is conditional upon an understood clause such as "If I were you" or "If you ask me;" and the verb "spare" politely overstates Uncle Maury's worth in a way that "be rid of" would not. The incongruity between Jason's assumed manner of the humble, Christian countryman and his true nature, coming through in the matter of his statement which mercilessly reminds Mrs. Compson of her brother's alcoholism and financial leeching, creates the humor here as much as the contrast between his colloquialism and his mother's melodramatics.

The passage also provides a good example of the technique Jason uses to mock and ridicule Mrs. Compson's assertions. Often, Jason will sarcastically take up a point his mother introduces, pretend to agree with and praise it, and then deflate the whole proposition by pursuing its

ludicrous implications. For example, Benjy as "baby" is met with the stance of a friend extolling the newborn's worth to the proud mother, followed by an exaggerated understatement of his real age and size: "he'll be quite a help to you when he gets his growth not being more than one and a half times as high as me now." Similarly, when Mrs. Compson suggests that Jason keep an eye on Quentin during the day, he responds, "'of course if you want me to follow her around and see what she does, I can quit the store and get a job where I can work all night. Then I can watch her during the day and you can use Ben for the night shift'" (181). Such flights of inspired mockery are signalled in Jason's monologue by the word "sure" or the phrase "of course" as he pretends to go along wholeheartedly with a given proposition.

Jason also likes to present his views as options for Mrs. Compson to consider: "'of course *if you want* me to follow her . . . " he says (emphasis added). By presenting his positions this way, in the form of suggestions or advice that Mrs. Compson can ostensibly accept or reject, Jason throws the burden of accountability of a given decision on his mother's shoulders despite the fact that the idea for a given course of action actually originates with himself. In these discussions, Jason thus manages to intimidate Mrs. Compson through mockery into accepting his advice while dextrously removing himself from the ultimate decision-making and its attendant responsibility.

Jason's method of dealing with his mother does not always work as well with the rest of his family, however, especially with his niece. Quentin often gives as good as she gets in verbal confrontations with her uncle. In an early scene, for example, she turns one of Jason's favorite verbal tricks against him. When Jason delivers an ultimatum giving Quentin ten seconds to put down her coffee cup, she replies by taking his words at face value: "'What time is it, Dilsey?' she says. "When it's ten seconds, you whistle'" (183). Responding as she does, Quentin daringly bests her domineering uncle by obeying his ultimatum literally but defying the intention behind it.

Jason also has some trouble with Quentin and others because of the difficulty he has in recognizing the sincerity of their most intense declarations and emotions. When Dilsey, for instance, offers herself as an object for Jason's physical wrath in place of Quentin, crying "'Hit me, den . . . ef nothin but hittin somebody wont do you'" (185), Jason responds as if her offer were an insincere trick: "'You think I wont?'" he says (185). Jason makes the same mistake when Quentin declares that she would tear off any dress of hers that her uncle or grandmother paid for. Jason's response inadvertently eggs Quentin on by assuming that her threat is hollow:

> "What would you do?" [Jason] says. "Wear a barrel?"
> "I'd tear it off and throw it in the street," she says. "dont you believe me?"
> "Sure you would," [he] says. "You do it every time." (187-88)

Quentin responds, much to Jason's surprise and aggravation, by actually trying to rip the dress off. From these two examples, it is apparent that Jason's habit of cynically if wittily tearing down his mother's hollow expressions of strong feeling prevents him from recognizing genuinely strong emotion when it really does present itself. As a result, he underestimates his target and misapplies his wit. Jason may possess the intelligence and verbal agility of the best Yoknapatawphan wisecrackers, but he lacks their skill at discernment and, consequently, their control.

At other points in the novel, Jason runs into similar trouble with strong emotion and applying his wit to best advantage. Evidently, he has so little familiarity with compassion and caring in his own heart that he even has trouble putting a name to such feelings when he encounters them in others and, on one occasion at least, in himself. When, for instance, Quentin becomes upset and expresses sorrow at ever having been born, Jason describes only her facial appearance: "her eyes turned kind of funny" (188); and when he himself experiences sorrow at his father's gravesite, he has trouble identifying it, saying, "I began to feel sort of funny" (202). This inability or reluctance to experience strong feeling himself or to empathize with the intense emotion of others facilitates a great deal of Jason's denigratory humor. Because of this lack of emotional involvement, he can reduce people, as Stephen M. Ross [2] and

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[2]"Jason Compson and Sut Lovingood: Southwestern Humor as Stream of Consciousness." *Studies in the Novel* 8 (Fall

James M. Cox have observed, to caricatures and objects through mechanical and animal imagery. Cox rightly praises Faulkner's achievement in "keeping the humor and meanness attendant upon each other in Jason's monologue," [3] when, for example, Jason describes Benjy as "the Great American Gelding" (263) or remarks on his brother's shambling gait or his snoring.

There is no distinction for Jason between this reductivism and similar deflating that does not involve people, such as his satirical description of golf as "knocking a dam oversized mothball around" (187). Like his comments about Uncle Maury's transparent efforts at concealing his alcoholism (after Uncle Maury claims to be leaving Mr.Compson's funeral early to comfort Mrs. Compson, Jason remarks, "Yes you ought to brought two bottles instead of just one" [201]) or his comments about his father's excessive drinking ("maybe the sideboard thought it was still father and tripped [Uncle Maury] up when he passed" [197]), Jason's name calling and debunking are unrestrained and uncompromising. He attributes almost all speech and action to petty and selfish motives such as needing a drink or whipping up self-pity, and fails to take into account the sadness and human weakness that are behind the deceptions and failings of those around him. To laugh about Mr. Compson drinking himself to death is to ignore the underlying pain

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[2](cont'd) 1976): 285.
[3]"Humor as Vision in Faulkner," *Faulkner and Humor*, 114. Subsequent references to Ross and Cox will be cited in the text.

and sorrow that causes him to drink. Jason's sarcastic observations may have some truth on their side, but they are unbelievably insensitive. Thus, although Jason's humor is born of reason and even imagination, it is utterly unbridled by compassion.

By inviting us to laugh with Jason because his observations wittily convey truth, Faulkner puts us in an uncomfortable position. Do we really want to be laughing, for instance, at Jason's assessment of his brother Quentin's confused attitude toward women, expressed in a speculative remark about Quentin's motive for committing suicide: "'Maybe he knew it [Caddie's baby] was going to be a girl,'[Jason tells his mother],"And that one more of them would be all that he could stand'"(261)? As Ross observes, with such comments Jason does "provide a perspective in his family different from that we have gained in the novel's first two sections, a corrective to our sympathies that exposes a kind of common-sense truth about the Compsons" (282), but to laugh with Jason at such times requires a heartlessness equal to his. In Jason's wit, Faulkner shows us the epitome of laughter as Bergson describes it, [4] which instills the laugher with a better opinion of himself at the expense of the person being laughed at and which divides members of society by promoting cruel reductivism rather than uniting society by correcting aberrant behavior as the best comedy does. It is a tribute to Faulkner's talent and

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[4]See the concluding pages of *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*.

genius that in Jason's section he can explore these implications of comedy, present to the reader the shams of the pathetic characters who deceive themselves and others, and keep Jason consistently merciless and repellent despite the veracity and, at times, the ingenuity that both informs his humor and associates him with Faulkner's admirable comic characters.

Jason's humor does not exclusively involve exposing the failings of his family members. Much of it arises from his verbal response to the predicaments he entangles himself in during the course of the day on which his section is set. As that day progresses, one thing after another upsets the ideal daily routine that Jason feels entitled to as the head of the Compson household. The number of obstacles, misfires, and miscues, ranging from missing lunch to losing heavily on the commodities market, is rich in comic potential. As Ross notes (282), Jason's troubles are the stuff of farce and slapstick comedy as the put-upon little guy attempts to hold his own against the chaos of existence or the indifference of big business.

As a result, some sympathy for Jason may be evoked as his frustrations accumulate. William N. Claxon argues in a recent essay that "we sympathize with Jason's view because in some sense we share it. Though not perhaps as paranoid as Jason, there are times when we feel the world is against us." [5] But is such sympathy really justified? I do not think

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[5] "Jason Compson: A Demoralized Wit." *Faulkner and Humor*, 30. Subsequent references to Claxon's essay will be noted in

so. The world is not Jason's worst enemy; Jason Compson is Jason's worst enemy. Over and over again, the circumstances that plague him are of his own making and are a result of the decisions he makes according to his spiteful personality. Jason is thwarted not so much by what Ross calls blunders resulting from "mundane decisions" or his "persistent ineptitude" (282) as by his own malevolence and viciousness. For example, Jason decides not to put the the spare tire and the tire pump back on his car, even though he has the opportunity to do so easily, because he inflexibly refuses to give Luster the least bit of assistance in household tasks: "There was the tire, leaning against the wall, but be damned if I was going to put it on" (187). Jason, of course, is eventually "damned" (at least inconvenienced) for *not* putting the tire and the pump on the car. He typically refuses to go an inch out of his way to perform an action that (apparently) has nothing in it for himself. Accordingly, when Jason finds himself in need of the tire pump later on, we are more tempted to laugh at him for getting what he deserves at the hands of comic justice than to sympathize with his suffering and frustration.

Similar inflexibility and selfishness account for nearly all of Jason's frustrations. Like many of Faulkner's characters, Jason becomes the butt of laughter because he tries to impose an inadmissable order on the motion of life in order to achieve an unachievably safe and static

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[5](cont'd) the text.

existence. He demands no less than a made-to-order universe in which his meals are prepared on time with the family present and quiet, in which work holds neither demands nor surprises, in which evenings are spent restfully with the newspaper, in which the stock market can be predicted only by Jason himself, and in which absolutely no one challenges his authority as the provider for the family and the head of the Compson household. In Faulkner's comic world such best laid plans go not often but always awry.

Jason's verbal reaction to the frustration of his ideal universe typifies his character: he complains. Throughout his section, Jason rails against those whom he thinks have mistreated him in an apparent attempt to gain sympathy for his selfish causes or at least to justify his often questionable conduct. His complaint reaches a high point as he recounts his efforts to creep up on Quentin and her companion in order to confirm his suspicions about her promiscuity. The passage is worth quoting at length because of its dependence on the effect of accumulation:

> I parked and got out. And now I'd have to go way around and cross a plowed field, the only one I had seen since I left town, with every step like somebody was walking along behind me, hitting me on the head with a club. I kept on thinking that when I got across the field at least I'd have something level to walk on, that wouldn't jolt me every step, but when I got into the woods it was full of underbrush and I had to twist around through it, and then I came to a ditch full of briars. I went along it for a while , but it got thicker and thicker, and all the time Earl probably telephoning home about where I was and getting Mother all upset.
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> When I finally got through I had had to wind around so much that I had to stop and figure out just where the car would be. I knew they wouldn't be

> far from it, just under the closest bush, so I turned and worked back toward the road. Then I couldn't tell just how far I was, so I'd have to stop and listen, and then with my legs not using so much blood, it would all go into my head like it would explode any minute and the sun getting down just to where it could shine straight into my eyes and my ears ringing so I couldn't hear anything. I went on, trying to move quiet, then I heard a dog or something and I knew that when he'd scented me he'd have to come helling up, and then it would be all off.
>
> I had gotten beggar lice and twigs and stuff all over me, inside my clothes and shoes and all, and then I happened to look around and I had my hand right on a bunch of poison oak. The only thing that I couldn't understand was why it was just poison oak and not a snake or something. So I didn't even bother to move it. I just stood there until the dog went away. Then I went on. (240-41)

The humor here results partly from the sheer accumulation of Jason's afflictions, just as it does when he throws out retort after retort in response to Mrs. Compson's melodramatic overstatements. In this respect, Jason's account resembles the mounting exaggeration of the tall tale as the odds against the heroic protagonist's success build to seemingly insurmountable levels. The climax involving the poison oak leaf is typical of Jason's mind set. He does not characterize such adversity as blind chance, but imagines that it is perfectly ordered (well, almost) to impede his personal efforts in a way that maximizes frustration. He ironically envisions "Circumstance" (306) as a master of orchestration, planning, and ingenuity.

Some of Jason's best sarcasm arises from these feats in imagining the world working directly and efficiently against him and from his mock encouragement of its forces. He employs this type of humor most often when he feels that his

authority is being threatened by his family's servants. In mock praise of an effort he perceives to deplete his household's food supply, he says of Dilsey, "She was so old she couldn't do any more than move hardly. But that's all right: we need somebody in the kitchen to eat up the grub the young ones cant tote off" (185). Both Claxon and James Mellard have suggested that this sarcastic wit is a protective defense for Jason, that "Expecting the worst and getting less makes him feel he is coming out ahead" (Claxon, 29). [6] I disagree. I think Jason imagines the worst and considers that he pretty much gets it. He does not at all feel that he has come out ahead, and takes consolation in nothing, although at times he ironically pretends to be consoled ("'You dont look all the way naked'" and "'You're on time for once, anyway,'"he tells Quentin [187,188]). Misfortune confirms for Jason his perceived martyrdom and justifies the dubious steps he takes to compensate himself for the wrongs he thinks his family have done him. From this martyrdom he gains the same perverse pleasure that Quentin's tight dress and slipping kimono seem to afford him. Jason thus uses humor to confirm and relish his beliefs rather than to modify or adjust them. As Ross observes of Jason in comparing him to Harris' Sut Lovingood (288), he lacks the most the redeeming trait of the comic wit: the ability to laugh at himself. Jason never does laugh at his own

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[6] Mellard's article is "Jason Compson: Humor, Hostility, and the Rhetoric of Aggression." *Southern Humanities Review* 3 (1969): 332-73.

foolishness; to the end he remains infexible.

Uncle Job, the old black laborer in Earl's store, is the temperamental opposite of Jason Compson and an earlier version of the resigned comic figure Faulkner created in Vernon Tull. Whereas Jason constructs unrealizable expectations and becomes increasingly frustrated as his plans are thwarted by the flux and motion of life, Job takes life's surprises in stride as they come. Job's attitude of resignation is evident in the amount of consideration he gives to the state and appearance of the store wagon: "A lot Job cared whether the wheel came off or not, [Jason complains,] "long as he wouldn't have too far to walk back" (250). Job's patient, flexible attitude (befitting his name) irks Jason tremendously, and his slow but steady progress in unpacking the store's new cultivators becomes the object of Jason's sarcasm and a running joke in Jason's section:

> I went on to the back, where old Job was uncrating [the cultivators] at the rate of about two bolts to the hour. (189)

> "Well," I says. "If you dont look out, that bolt will grow into your hand." (230)

As do Faulkner's sanest characters, Job possesses a healthy indifference to the tight schedule of industry and commerce, preferring instead to work and live at his own pace, despite Jason's exhortations to do otherwise.

Job also differs from Jason in casting his lot with the rest of imperfect and fallible humanity, who in this case are represented by the poor farmers and laborers whose

hard-earned and scarce spending money is gladly given over to the travelling music show which comes to Jefferson. Job willingly exchanges his quarter for the variety that a man picking a tune out on a bandsaw brings to small county life, an intangible commodity that Jason (who seems to have absolutely no understanding of play) would never consider valuable: "'I dont begridge um,'" Job tells Jason of the show's producers, "'I kin sho afford my two bits'" (231). To Jason's subsequent protest that he is a fool for allowing someone to take his money in exchange for "a dam two cent box of candy or something," Job replies with a universal statement about human fallibilty: "'Well,'" he says, "'I dont spute that neither. Ef that uz a crime, all chain-gangs wouldn't be black'" (231). As Mellard observes of Job's retort, [7] "Not only does [Job] suggest that Jason is a fool himself, he also shows that he knows there is social injustice in Jason's world." Like Quentin, Job can best Jason despite repression. Mellard identifies Job's comic stance as that of the *eiron*, a traditional comic character who shrewdly rebukes the foolish behavior he sees in his social "superiors" under the guise of ignorance, self-deprecation, naivete, and subservience. [8] In Job's humor we see the best kind of comic spirit, one which corrects and educates by subtly affording the foolish person the opportunity to see his or her own folly and to do

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[7] "Type and Archetype: Jason Compson as Satirist." *Genre* 4 (1971): 185.

[8] For a detailed discussion of this comic archetype see Northrop Frye's *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 172-75.

something about it. Such wit draws its target away from foolish pride or vanity and back into harmony with the rest of society while it avoids boosting the ego of the wit's initiator. In doing so, this humor is a unifying social force quite different from the reductive, divisive humor Jason wields.

In his recent essay, Claxon demonstrates the importance of the riddle to Jason's humor and the egoistic twist Jason gives the riddle. He argues that "Jason adapts the basic question and answer to create his own version of wit. Instead of posing a question, he makes a statement which requires some sort of explanation. The explanation, when given, frequently has the ring of truth [even though the initial statement seems puzzling, inconsistent, or absurd]" (23-4). A good example of what Claxon is describing is Jason's comment on Earl's habit of checking the courthouse clock to verify his watch's timekeeping: "'You ought to have a dollar watch,' [Jason advises Earl.] 'It wont cost you so much to believe its lying each time'" (245). [9] Claxon goes on to say that Jason removes the contest element in a true riddle "first by not asking a question and then by not giving [his target] the chance to respond. . . . his form of the riddle serves the . . . function of making the riddler

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[9] Faulkner's sense of comic timing and his ability to transfer it to the page evident in these "riddles" in his practice of separating the initial statement and its explanation with a delaying phrase such as "he says" which allows the initial remark to sink in and the punch line to be anticipated. He consistently attends to such effects of timing throughout his passages of witty dialogue.

superior to the recipient, and so adds to Jason's own feeling of superiority"(24).

To Claxon's analysis I would add that such wit is not practiced exclusively by Jason Compson but is common to all Yoknapatawphan wits, whose technique, though not intent, is the same. Job, for example, uses the riddle's structure in a purer and fairer way to try to teach Jason a lesson about the latter's behavior:

> 'I wont try to fool you,' [Job] says. 'You's too smart for me. Aint a man in dis town kin keep up wid you fer smartness. You fools a man whut so smart he cant even keep up wid hisself," he says, getting in the wagon and unwrapping the reins.
> 'Who's that?' [Jason] says.
> 'Dat's Mr Jason Compson,' he says. (250)

Characteristically, Job feigns ignorance, innocence, and harmlessness to get Jason to let his guard down before crowning him with the truth about the smartness, which causes Jason more problems than it solves. It is important to note here that the riddle is intended for Jason's benefit and not as an insult or put-down. We get no sense from Job, as we do from Jason in similar circumstances, that the intent behind the humor is to increase the riddler's self worth at the expense of his listener's. Job's humor is sincerely didactic, although it can only work if, upon reflection, the recipient is flexible enough and honest enough to admit to the foolishness that has been pointed out. Jason, of course, is incapable of being that flexible or truthful. He cannot acknowledge, as Job can, his kinship with people in lapsing into occasional folly, nor will he

admit that he might benefit from another person's criticism when he does act foolishly. "I dont need any man's help," Jason declares, "I can stand on my own two feet like I always have" (206).

Doc Peabody, the Jefferson physician who tends to the Bundren family in *As I Lay Dying*, falls between Job, the wise, resigned comic wit and Jason, the frenzied, misanthropic buffoon. Peabody is wise, compassionate, and flexible, but also sarcastic and, on the surface at least, querulous. His humor is typically Yoknapatawphan in its reliance on revearsal, exaggeration, imagination, and ingenuity. It depends, like Jason's, on accumulation, timing, and even mockery, but the purpose to which it is put and the people against whom it is directed set it apart from Jason's unrestrained, destructive humor.

The opening paragraph of Peabody's first monologue will serve as a suitable starting point to demonstate the unique strain of Yoknapatawphan humor that enlivens his monologues:

> When Anse finally sent for me of his own accord, I said "He has wore her out at last." And I said a damn good thing, and at first I would not go because there might be something I could do and I would have to haul her back, by God. I thought maybe they have the same sort of fool ethics in heaven they have in Medical College and that it was maybe Vernon Tull sending for me again, getting me there in the nick of time, as Vernon always does things, getting the most for Anse's money like he does for his own. But when I got far enough into the day I knew it couldn't have been anybody but Anse that sent. I knew that nobody but a luckless man could ever need a doctor in the face of a cyclone. And I knew that if it had finally occurred to Anse himself that he needed one, it was already too late. (28) [10]

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[10] All quotations from *As I Lay Dying* are taken from *William*

The passage operates mainly on the reversal of expectations. We do not, for instance, expect that it is a "damn good thing" for Anse to have worn Addie out, but on second thought Peabody's point makes sense since Addie's death will bring an end to her suffering. The same reason allows us to accept Peabody's position of not wanting to prolong Addie's life as the Medical College would have him do. Peabody's stance in this instance aligns him with Faulkner's wisest characters, including his wise fools, who depart from official, codified rules of conduct when doing so will fulfill the spirit and intentions those rules were created to uphold. In this respect, Peabody differs from Jason, who often fulfills the letter of an agreement or promise but fails to honor its spirit.

Nevertheless, there are clear similarities between this passage and Jason's monologue. Peabody's passage is a complaint, complete with curses and oaths, about his circumstances and about a world in which there is too much suffering (although Peabody, unlike Jason, refers to the suffering of others more than his own), impersonal institutions, and an accumulation of obstacles and absurdity for the speaker. Peabody, like Jason, expects the worst, in this case from Anse, and gets it both in the storm and in the fact that Anse's tardiness in sending for him makes his trip out to the Bundren's farm somewhat meaningless. In a style that resembles Jason's, Peabody exaggerates the

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[10](cont'd) *Faulkner: Novels 1930-1936*. New York: Library of America, 1985.

violence of the storm (calling it a "cyclone") and thus the demands made of him. He also satirizes the passivity and slowness to act that Anse uses to get others to do his work for him. In using the the verb "occurred to," Peabody implies that Anse would not even expend enough energy to think up a course of action to follow as his wife dies, let alone to think up one in time for it to do any good.

Peabody's technique also resembles Jason's in that he too will present a riddle-like assertion which requires some further explanation he will eventually supply: "when it got far enough into the day I knew it couldn't have been anybody but Anse that sent." Two exaggerated but basically valid explanations follow this puzzling assertion in a climactic arrangement, with one wittily topping the other: "I knew nobody but a luckless man could ever need a doctor in the face of a cyclone. And I knew that if it had finally occurred to Anse himself that he needed one, it was already too late." Peabody, like Jason, never appears to be at a loss to add quips to those he has already fired off.

Peabody's monologue, besides the opening paragraph, bears a specific affinity to Jason's in the speaker's tendency to complain about his own hardship and to suggest that there is a governing malevolent principle behind it. Jason speculates imaginatively that the forces opposed to him slipped up only in failing to substitute a snake for the poison oak leaf when he was stalking Quentin. Peabody complains about his predicament in the same way as Anse

pulls him up the bluff on which the Bundrens' farmhouse is situated:

> I'll be damned if I can see why I dont quit. A man seventy years old, weighing two hundred odd pounds, being hauled up and down a damn mountain on a rope. I reckon it's because I must reach the fifty thousand dollar mark of dead accounts on my books before I can quit. (29)

However, although the passage bears a stylistic resemblance to Jason's monologue (Peabody curses and exaggerates his situation, calling the bluff a mountain and estimating his dead accounts at nearly fifty thousand dollars), its spirit is significantly different. His complaint, unlike Jason's, has no essential sincerity. Of course Peabody knows why he does not quit: a physician, he cares about people and therefore helps them no matter what the inconvenience, whether it be physical or financial.

Moreover, Peabody shows an awareness of his own ridiculousness which Jason never exhibits. Jason never makes humorous remarks at his own expense, but Peabody often does. For example, putting up a front of self-interestedness, Peabody tells Anse to hurry toward the farmhouse because he "'dont aim for that storm to catch [him, Peabody] up [on the bluff] (29), but then collapses his callous pose of caring only for his own interests and not for his patients' with a self-deprecating comment on his own rotundity: "'I'd blow too durn far once I got started'" (29).

Peabody strikes the same gruff stance, which hides a compassionate understanding of his patients and their families, when he tends to Addie at her bedside: "'Well,

Miss Addie,' [he says]. . . . 'How are you, sister?' . . . 'You picked a fine time to get me out here and bring up a storm'" (30). Peabody's sarcastic complaint is neither sincere nor self-serving. He keeps up the appearance of being put out and of caring only for his own needs in order to spare Addie the embarrassment and humiliation that she would feel in having to acknowledge that she needed a doctor's help. Peabody understands Yoknapatawphan pride well. He knows that Addie, like many self-reliant characters in Faulkner's fictional world (Jewel Bundren or Henry Armstid, for instance), would never want to admit to needing anyone's help or to accept someone's charity and compassion even in times of dire need. Peabody, referring to this pride, says:

> I have seen it before in women. Seen them drive from the room them coming with sympathy and pity, with actual help, and clinging to some trifling animal to whom they never were more than pack horses. That's what they mean by the love that passeth understanding: that pride, that furious desire to hide that abject nakedness which we bring here with us. . . . (31)

Peabody's sarcastic bedside manner ("'You picked a fine time to get me here and bring up a storm'") leaves Addie her pride because it implies that she has been controlling her own situation. His question about her health ("'How are you, sister'") works the same way; it avoids the assumption that Addie is deathly ill and therefore helpless. Peabody's bedside manner thus relies on treating his patient as if he or she were able to be as strong and sarcastic as the physician himself. In this way, Peabody engages his sarcasm

to prevent his listener's humiliation rather than to effect it, as Jason Compson likes to do.

Nevertheless, Peabody experiences outrage and anger that, at times, places him temperamentally closer to Jason than to Job even to the extent that he employs Jason's favorite trick of taking a person's statement or conduct and pushing it mockingly to extremes of exaggeration. In his second section, Peabody relates his encounter with, and reaction to, Cash, whose leg has been set in a cement cast. As the scene progresses, Peabody's sarcasm mounts to outrageous heights:

> And dont tell me it aint going to bother you to lose sixty-odd square inches of skin to get that concrete off. And dont tell me it aint going to bother you to have to limp around on one short leg for the balance of your life -- if you walk at all again. Concrete" I said. "God Almighty, why didn't Anse carry you to the nearest sawmill and stick your leg in the saw? That would have cured it. Then you all could have stuck his head into the saw and cured a whole family. (162)

Similarly, Peabody greets the fact that Anse has had to borrow a shovel in order to bury Addie's corpse with sarcastic assent to the logic of such dependent behavior: "'That's right,' [he] said. 'Of course he'd have to borrow a spade to bury his wife with. Unless he could borrow a hole in the ground. Too bad you all didn't put him in it too'" (162). Despite the similarities between Peabody's tone here and Jason's in *The Sound and the Fury* (even the expressions used are the same -- "That's right" and "Of course") the spirit of the humor is different. Peabody is outraged at the hardship Anse has caused his family, at the ignorance and

suffering of the rural folk, not at wrongs done to himself. Whereas Jason preys upon the failings of the weak, such as Uncle Maury, for his humor, Peabody attacks the inhumanity of the strong and invulnerable, such as Anse.

Peabody's humanism and his championing of the common Yoknapatawphans appears nowhere more movingly than in the scene surrounding Addie's funeral. The passage shows Peabody at his best as he reacts to the timeless confrontation between ordinary people and death and catastrophe. The section is narrated by Vernon Tull who, with the other Yoknapatawphan men, waits awkwardly outside the Bundrens' house for Addie's funeral service to end, and discusses the recent collapse of his bridge due to flooding:

> We go back to the trestles and plank ends and sit or squat.
> "I knowed it [Tull's bridge] would go," Armstid says.
> "It's been there a long time, that ere bridge," Quick says.
> "The Lord has kept it there, you mean," Uncle Billy says. "I dont know ere a man that's touched hammer to it in twenty-five years."
> "How long has it been there, Uncle Billy?" Quick says.
> "It was built in . . . . . let me see . . . . . It was in the year 1888," Uncle Billy says. "I mind it because the first man to cross it was Peabody coming to my house when Jody was born."
> "If I'd a crossed it every time your wife littered since, it'd a been wore out long before this, Billy," Peabody says.
> We laugh, suddenly loud, then suddenly quiet again. We look a little aside at one another.(57)

Peabody's joke not only temporarily relieves the tension and awkwardness that the men are feeling in the presence of death, it reminds them of the natural rhythm of life and of the mutual support that the community relies on. The remark

includes one person (Peabody) coming to another's need; it includes the birth of children and the renewal of life; and it includes the speaker's own failing, his weight, which keeps him from seeming better than anyone else despite his altruistic occupation. As a result, Peabody's humor sustains, encourages, and binds together the Yoknapatawphans in a time of strangeness and awkwardness. In Peabody's small joke, and in all of his gruff, sarcastic humor, Faulkner combines Job's wisdom, his resilience, and his ability to avoid taking himself too seriously with the intelligence, edge, and imagination of Jason Compson's wit. The result is a unifying humor that provides the best that comedy can offer.

IV. Faulkner's Comedy, *The Reivers*

Michael Millgate has called *The Reivers* "an anthology of the most characteristic types of Faulknerian humor." [1] His statement is only partly true. The novel's dialogue is characteristically Yoknapatawphan in its wit, and the plot does involve horse-trading and other finagling, but missing is the dark laughter one associates with Faulkner's other novels, with for instance the Bundrens' trials in *As I Lay Dying* or with Mink Snopes efforts to dispose of Jack Houston's ubiquitous corpse in *The Hamlet*. Missing also are the absurd but pathetically comic characters often present in Faulkner's works, such as the wingwalker in "Death Drag" or Ab and Vynie Snopes in *The Hamlet*, whose desperation drives them to folly and ruin. Nevertheless, *The Reivers* is basically one more variation on a theme Faulkner addressed throughout his career, namely, the struggle involved in adapting to and participating in the flux and motion of life. [2] As the Yoknapatawphan men are to the Texas horses in *The Hamlet*, as the tall convict is to the flooding Mississippi River in "Old Man," so are Ned, Boon, and above all, Lucius Priest to the Winton Flyer and the road to Memphis. The main difference in *The Reivers*, however, is that the protagonists submit virtually unresistingly to the call to participate in motion and return from their encounter with it different and wiser but essentially

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[1] *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, 254.
[2] The best discussion of this theme is Richard P. Adams' study, *Faulkner: Myth and Motion*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968.

unharmed and certainly undefeated.

Much of the humor in *The Reivers* arises from dialogue, specifically, from the witty retorts exchanged between the novel's Yoknapatawphan characters. A memorable example is the confrontation between the three protagonists and the Mississippi entrepreneur who farms the mud of Hell Creek Bottom for his living. The negotiations over services rendered and fair prices for them are reminiscent of many scenes in Faulkner, [3] but one would be hard-pressed to find a funnier version of Yoknapatawphan haggling. As usual, the participants' objectives, their negotiating positions, and their true opinions of each other are concealed by a veil of politeness and fair-dealing. The opening exchange between the mud farmer, Boon, and Ned is typical:

> "Morning boys," [the mud farmer] said. "Looks like you're about ready for me now. Howdy, Jefferson," he said to Boon. "Looks like you did get through last summer after all."
> "Looks like it," Boon said. . . . "We might a got through this time too if you folks didn't raise such heavy mud up here."
> "Don't hold that against us," the man said. "Mud's one of our best crops up thisaway."
> "At two dollars a mudhole, it ought to be your best," Ned said. [4]

The incongruity between appearance and reality in this passage is the main source of its humor, especially the characters' achievements in sustaining the idea that

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[3] See, for example, the opening chapter of *Light in August*, in which Armstid is negotiating to buy a cultivator from Winterbottom when Lena Grove appears on the road to Jefferson.

[4] *The Reivers*. New York: Random House, 1962, 88. Further references to *The Reivers* will be cited by page number in the text.

mud-farming is a fair and legitimate occupation while acknowledging that it is an ingenious swindle. Such indirect statement and the tension between what is said and what is meant is typical of Faulkner's witty trading scenes.

There is one notable difference in *The Reivers*'s scene, however. Unlike Ned, the epitome of the shrewd dealer, who manages to convey his opinion of the mud farmer while keeping up the appearance of congeniality, Boon threatens to ruin the negotiations completely, or at least to drive up the mud farmer's unusually flexible towing rates, because of his short temper. Boon's difficulty lies in his inability to play the role of the *eiron*, the traditional comic character whose insecure station in life forces him to conceal his intelligence and veil his wit. [5] Boon needs to play the *eiron* to keep the mud farmer's toll at a minimum by neither insulting nor angering him. However, as the mud farmer's greed becomes increasingly apparent, Boon's outrage causes him to abandon his role and, with it, all appearance of congeniality. As the chapter ends, Boon's frustration over the mud farmer's unusual method of tabulating rates gets the best of him:

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[5] In Roman comedy this character was often a slave; in Renaissance comedy, a servant or a valet. In Faulkner, the *eiron* is usually a black servant or laborer such as Uncle Job in *The Sound and the Fury* or Ned in *The Reivers*, but a white character will sometimes assume the role not so much out of necessity, as the black characters must do, but for amusement and pleasure. V.K. Ratliff's conversation with Jody Varner about Ab Snopes' affiliation with barn burning in the first chapter of *The Hamlet* is a good example. For a fuller description of the traditional *eiron*, see Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 172-75 and 226-28.

> "It's six dollars," [the mud farmer] said.
> "Last year it was two dollars," Boon said. "You said it's double now. Double two is four. All right. Here's four dollars."
> "I charge a dollar a passenger," the man said. "There was two of you last year. That was two dollars. The price is doubled now. There's three of you. That's six dollars. Maybe you'd rather walk back to Jefferson than pay six dollars, but maybe that boy and that nigger wouldn't.". . .
> "God damn it," Boon said, "this boy ain't nothing but a child! Sholy for just a little child -- "
> "Walking back back to Jefferson might be lighter for him," the man said, "but it won't be no shorter."
> "All right," Boon said, "but look at the other one! When he gets that mud washed off, he ain't even white!"
> The man looked at distance awhile. Then he looked at Boon. "Son," he said, "both these mules is color-blind." (90-91)

The mud farmer's logically illogical computations and inflationary adjustments are particularly humorous here, especially when they are played off Boon, who persists in trying to impose reason and fairness on them with no possible success. In addition, the mud farmer's virtuosity at justifying his own scurrility, more than a match for Boon, reflects Faulkner's own considerable talent at creating comic dialogue.

Not all of *The Reivers*'s humor comes out of its dialogue. The narration of Grandfather Lucius is also witty and humorous. This dramatised narrator is unique in Faulkner's works because of the wide range of styles in which he relates his story. For instance, his narration contains many passages of didactic wit and wisdom as the aged narrator digresses to explain some aspect of

turn-of-the-century life to his younger audience. The discourse on the comparative intelligence of rats, cats, dogs, mules, and horses is representative of this style of the narrator's monologue. After defining intelligence as "the ability to cope with environment . . . yet retain at least something of personal liberty" (121), Grandfather Lucius expounds first on the rat, which he rates most highly, and then proceeds to lecture humorously on the comparative merits of the cat:

> The cat is third, with some of the same qualities [as the rat] but a weaker, punier creature; he neither toils nor spins, he is a parasite on you but he does not love you; he would die, cease to exist, vanish from the earth . . . but so far he has not had to. (There is the fable, Chinese I think, literary I am sure; of a period on earth when the dominant creatures were cats: who after ages of trying to cope with the anguishes of mortality -- famine, plague, war, injustice, folly, greed -- in a word, civilised government -- convened a congress of the wisest cat philosophers to see if anything could be done: who after long deliberation agreed that the dilemma, the problems themselves were insoluble and the only practical solution was to give it up, relinquish, abdicate, by selecting from among the lesser creatures a species, race optimistic enough to believe that the mortal predicament could be solved and ignorant enough never to learn better. Which is why the cat lives with you, is completely dependent on you for food and shelter but lifts no paw for you and loves you not; in a word, why your cat looks at you the way it does.) (121-122)

The basic comic thrust of this passage, apart from its humorously plausible explanation of the cat's behavior to its owner, is its deflation of the idea that man is the most intelligent creature on earth. Comically undercutting man's pride, it blends mild satire of human ideas of progress, achievement, and self-importance with backhanded praise for

the humans' efforts to improve their lot. In addition, Grandfather Lucius' definition of intelligence pertains directly to some Faulkner's serious concerns about existence. Faulkner's sanest characters are just those who cope with their environment by retaining what they can of personal liberty and personal dignity. It is no coincidence apparently that Faulkner named V.K. Suratt/Ratliff, one of his most resilient characters, with the rat in mind.

The Reivers's narrator is also able to relate his reminiscence in a raucous, tall tale style that hearkens back to to the writings of the frontier humorists. The anecdote that opens the novel, culminating in the description of Boon's shooting rampage through the Jefferson town square on market day, is told in this manner. The culminating passage is chiefly comprised of one long sentence in which the riotous details of Boon's spree build to an uproarious climax:

> So Father, Luster and I hurried up the alley toward the Square, me trotting now, and still too late. We hadn't even reached the end of the alley when we heard the shots, five of them: WHOW WHOW WHOW WHOW WHOW like that, then we were in the Square and (it wasn't far: right at the corner in front of Cousin Isaac McCaslin's hardware store) we could see it. There were plenty of them; Boon sure picked his day for witnesses; First Saturdays were trade days even then, even in May when you would think people would be too busy getting land planted. But not in Yoknapatawpha County. They were all there, black and white: one crowd where another deputy was holding Ludus about twenty feet away and still in the frozen attitude of running or frozen in the attitude of running, or in the attitude of frozen running, whichever is right, and another crowd around the window of Cousin Ike's store which one of Boon's bullets (they never did find where the other four went) had shattered after creasing the buttock of a

> Negro girl who was now lying on the pavement screaming until Cousin Ike himself came jumping out of the store and drowned her voice with his, roaring with rage at Boon not for ruining his window but (Cousin Ike was young then but already the best woodsman and hunter this county ever had) for being unable to hit with five shots an object only twenty feet away. (14-15)

The passage is similar in its accumulative effect to Ratliff's description of Ab Snopes' dismay at the collapse of the mules he has traded for in *The Hamlet* (39). It also resembles the description of the fox and hounds that tear through Uncle Buck and Buddy's house in "Was." Boon, like the fox (or the spotted horses), is a riot figure, a life force disrupting the established routine of the Yoknapatawphan community through raucous behavior that verges on violence and chaos. As well, the "frozen attitude" of Ludus suggests the world of the animated cartoon in which action can be halted at its height for comic effect. Faulkner used the same technique in the description in *The Hamlet* of young Wall Snopes standing motionless before the knothole in the barn door moments after the rampaging horses had exploded it to pieces (283). As in the world of animation, the reader is assured in *The Reivers* well before the scene that no real violence or serious suffering will occur by the narrator's insistence on the fact that Boon cannot shoot straight. [6] The caricature of the single-minded

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[6] In his article "The Road to *The Reivers*," James B. Corothers shows how Faulkner made the scene, which also appears in an abbreviated form in the short story "Lion," much less violent in *The Reivers*. In "Lion" Ludus is hit in the face by Boon's last shot. See *"A Cosmos of My Own": Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha 1980* Ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 120-123.

Ike McCaslin, who becomes enraged at this failing of Boon's instead of at his wounding the girl or shattering the store window, also contributes to the exaggerated tall tale style of the account.

In the reminiscence of Grandfather Lucius Priest, Faulkner also achieves an effect similar to that of the spotted horses episode in *The Hamlet*. He combines the oral quality of genial, anecdotal storytelling with tour de force descriptive paragraphs which one normally associates only with more formal written language. The result is that certain passages of *The Reivers* gain epic stature. In the second half of the novel, the humorously anecdotal passages disappear and the novel's tone grows more serious as young Lucius, observing good and evil first-hand, becomes initiated into manhood. Even though the second half of the novel is comedic in that it celebrates novelty, ingenuity, cleverness, marriage and birth, the style is different from that of the early chapters. The frieze of comic riot in the opening chapter yields to a frieze of epic determination and strength in chapter seven as Boon, Sam, and the nameless railway worker attempt to position the freight car that will transport Lightning to Parsham:

> The man set his lantern down and climbed the ladder onto the roof and released the brake wheel and Sam and Boon jammed the ends of the bars between the back wheels and the rails, pinching and nudging in short strokes like pumping and I still didn't believe it: the car looming black and square and high in the moon, solid and rectangular as a black wall inside the narrow silver frame of the moonlight, one high puny figure wrenching at the brake wheel on top and two more puny figures

> crouching, creeping, nudging the silver-lanced iron bars back behind the wheels; so huge and so immobile that at first it looked, not like the car was moving forward, but rather Boon and Sam in terrific pantomimic obeisance were pinching infinitesimally rearward past the car's fixed and foundationed mass, the moon-mazed panoramic earth: so delicately balanced now in the massive midst of Motion that Sam and Boon dropped the bars and Boon alone pressed the car gently on with his hands. . . . (145-146)

This universal image of the irresistible force of "puny" but determined man meeting a virtually immovable object and coming out victorious embodies part of Faulkner's most serious view of and praise for the indomitable human race. Moreover, the style, far removed from the comic anecdotes of V.K. Ratliff or even Lucius Priest himself earlier in the novel, is no less elevated than the manner in which Faulkner describes Dilsey, regally dressed, gazing into the rain and coping with her troubles, at the opening of the fourth section of *The Sound and the Fury*. It is not the sort of passage one might expect to come across in a genial reminiscence of a grand misadventure. As with the spotted horses episode in *The Hamlet*, Faulkner has transformed a humorous, light tale into a more serious treatment of the theme of men, women and motion.

Of course, *The Reivers* is not chiefly made up of such heightened prose, but the serious theme of the encounter with "Motion," not only Lucius' encounter with it but that of the other characters too, pervades even some of the lightest passages in the novel. The reaction of the generation of Lucius' grandparents to the changes and challenges that the new automobile represents affords a good

illustration. One of the comic highpoints in the novel is reached when new realities meet with old customs as Boss Priest first turns his head to spit out of a moving automobile:

> Grandmother was sitting on the left side . . . directly behind Grandfather. She said at once to Boon: "Stop the automobile," and sat there, not mad so much as coldly and implacably outraged and shocked. She was just past fifty then . . . and in all those fifty years she had no more believed that a man, let alone her husband, would spit in her face than she would have believed that Boon for instance would approach a curve in the road without tooting the horn. She said, to nobody; she didn't even raise her hand to wipe the spit away:
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> "Take me home." . . .
>
> "Dont touch me," she said. "Drive on." So we went on, Grandmother with the long drying brown splash across one of her goggles and down her cheek even though Mother kept offering to spit on her handkerchief and wipe it off. "Let me alone, Alison," Grandmother said. (40)

Grandmother Priest's attempts to retain some dignity in the face of an unforeseen insult are certainly comical, but equally humorous, and important, is the adaptation that results from the incident:

> . . . more and more that summer it would be just Mother and us and Aunt Callie and one or two neighbor children in the back seat, Mother's face flushed and bright and eager, like a girl's. Because she had invented a kind of shield on a handle like a big fan, light enough for her to raise in front of us almost as fast as Grandfather could turn his head. So he could chew now, Mother always alert and ready with the screen; all of us were quick now in fact, so that almost before the instant when Grandfather knew he was going to turn his head to the left to spit, the screen had already come up and all of us in the back seat had leaned to the right like we were on the same wire. . . . (41)

The whole episode of the new automobile and Boss Priest's tobacco-chewing is a comical treatment of Faulkner's concern

that people be able to adapt to change and to cope with their environment while retaining personal liberty and dignity. The suggestion of renewal in the passage ("Mother's face [was] flushed . . . like a girl's") is delightful, and Faulkner repeats it when he has Boon take the aging Miss Ballenbaugh for a similar ride later on in the novel.

In fact, there are suggestions of rejuvenation and positive transformation throughout *The Reivers*. Most obviously, Corrie is transformed by Lucius' faith in honor and virtue back into Everbe Corinthia, and Boon changes from a reckless child/bachelor into a responsible husband and parent. In addition, the gentlemanly code of behavior is passed on from the aging Boss Priest to his grandson Lucius, who consequently ceases to be a child as he assumes the responsibility of being accountable for his own deeds and misdeeds. All three of these transformations are essentially comedic in that they involve what Northrop Frye has called "the theme of the comic," namely, some form of integration or reintegration into society. [7]Lucius is initiated into society by gaining knowledge of good and evil; Boon and Corrie relinquish their Memphis lives to be domesticated residents of Jefferson, where Boon purchases a suitably tranquil home, "the little back-street almost doll-size house" from Boss Priest. Even Ned is rejuvenated in a way. A modern version of the trickster slave of Roman comedy[8], he

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[7]*The Anatomy of Criticism*, 43.
[8]Frye identifies this character as "the spirit of comedy" and the "*architectus* of the comic action who is "entrusted with hatching the schemes which bring about the hero's

is rewarded if not with total independence, at least with a financial windfall and a renewed reputation as a master finagler.

With such a happy ending, *The Reivers* is unquestionably Faulkner's truest comedy. In addition to the concluding marriage and birth, its protagonist sets out on a quest for mere adventure and returns with something more valuable, wisdom and maturity. This outcome is far different from the end of *As I Lay Dying*, in which a quest is completed in an unexpected way, but for the worst, with a chilling parody of marriage and comic triumph in Anse's betrothal to the duck-shaped woman. *The Reivers'* humor also differs in kind from the humor of resignation that informs Vernon Tull's monologues in *As I Lay Dying*, or that sets the tone for *The Hamlet*, in which the best V.K. Ratliff can hope for is not success at halting the rise of Snopesism, but the consolation that he is flexible enough and human enough to be able to laugh at his own defeat and the folly that brought it about. *The Reivers* is equally removed from the souring of Ab Snopes story and the spotted horses episode. For once, the people who venture out beyond the everyday and allow themselves to be caught up in the whirl of finagling, dealing, trading, and betting come out ahead and even do some good for the women who love them. No one loses as Ab Snopes does (except Butch, who deserves to); no one is driven to insanity as is Henry Armstid. In *The Reivers*, the

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[8](cont'd) victory," *Anatomy*, 173-174.

characters do not merely endure their trials with the resigned humor of a Vernon Tull or the unwavering optimism of a Lena Grove. This time, they are allowed to prevail.

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Appendix

The following is a summary of the events and transactions in "Fool About a Horse" and "The Souring of Ab Snopes."

Having traded some "bob-wire and busted tools" with Beasley Kemp for a run-down horse, "Pap" Suratt [9] decides to take the horse, teamed with his family's only mule, to Jefferson. He must travel there to buy an expensive milk separator for his wife, Vynie, who has saved her "egg- and quilt-money" for four years to facilitate the purchase. Pap makes his decision about the newly acquired horse because Vynie, hoping to persuade her husband through mockery to give up horse-trading and to attend more diligently to their fields, has taunted him about the sorry-looking horse's worth. In having the horse help to pull their wagon to Jefferson, Pap intends to show his skeptical wife that it has some value. On the way to Jefferson, however, the hot sun and a fit of galloping result in the horse "sweat[ing] into as pretty a blood bay as you ever see." Because his horse looks so much better and has galloped so spiritedly, Pap considers the possibility of trading it for a profit in town.

His mind is made up when he passes through Frenchman's Bend and talks to the men who habitually lounge outside Varner's store. From them, he learns that Beasley Kemp had originally obtained the horse for eight dollars cash from Herman Short, who in turn had obtained it, five years before, from the legendary horse-swapper Pat Stamper in exchange for a buckboard and a set of harness. Discovering that, coincidentally, Stamper is camped just outside of Jefferson, and outraged that Yoknapatawpha County pride has been violated by the Tennessee trader, who had "[come] into the county and [started] actual cash money jumping from hand to hand," Pap decides to attempt to restore the honor he considers the county to have lost by out-swapping Pat.

Before he reaches Stamper's camp, Pap turns off the road and sends his son V.K., who has accompanied Pap since they left home, to town. There the boy buys some salt peter, some tar, and a fish hook, with which Pap cleverly doctors the horse to give it the appearance of having spirit and vigor. Pap and V.K. then proceed to the camp of the legendary horse-trader, but Stamper refuses to make any deal for only the horse; instead, he offers to swap a matched team of mules that "looked jest exactly all right" for it and Pap's good mule. Pap agrees, thinking he has traded a worthless horse and a good mule fo a smartly matched team of mules. However, approaching Jefferson, the "matched" but nevertheless ungovernable team gallops at full speed into

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[9] See chapter one, note eight.

the town square and nearly throws Pap and V.K. from the wagon. Pap and V.K. enter McCaslin's store, buy the separator, and return to the wagon only to discover that their new mules have collapsed in total exhaustion.

Infuriated, and hoping to reverse the initial trade and get back his mule, Pap seeks Stamper out a second time. Stamper refuses to reverse the first deal but offers to return the good mule and to give Pap a black horse, which "was so fat it could hardly walk," in exchange for the exhausted mules, plus cash. After downing a bottle of whiskey, Pap goes back to Jefferson, returns his wife's separator, and uses that money to close the deal with Stamper for the good mule and the fat black horse.

V.K. then drives his drunken father home, but, before they arrive, it begins to rain and the fat horse changes color from black to bay. V.K. immediately alerts his father, and soon they can hear a hissing noise coming from the the now bay-colored horse, which proceeds to deflate. Pap and V.K. discover that Stamper's assistant, Jim, had used a bicycle pump to inflate the same horse that Pap had acquired from Beasley Kemp (and traded to Pat in the first place), colored it black, and resold it to Pap. As a result, Pap is out the money his wife gave him to buy the separator and has nothing to show for it except the mule and the horse he started the day with.

When he returns home, Vynie sets out for Jefferson herself with Beasley Kemp's horse and returns with the milk separator, having apparently persuaded Stamper to revoke the deals he made with Pap. Thus Vynie effectively brings her husband's horse-trading adventures to an end.

"The Souring of Ab Snopes" is essentially the same as "Fool About a Horse" in the details of its plot, with the following exception. When Ab returns home to Vynie without the milk separator, she sets out for Jefferson herself with Beasley's horse, returns home, and sets out a second time with the family's only cow. She then returns home with the machine, but she can only use it to separate a bucket of milk which Ab has had the foresight to borrow from V.K's family. The story concludes with Ab asking V.K. to bring another gallon of milk along with him the next morning because, he tells his young neighbor of the separator, "'It looks like she is fixing to get a heap of pleasure and satisfaction outen it.'"